SPECIAL EVENTS ISSUE

IAAPA NEWS

Working Toward Sustainable Food and Beverage Services p. 73

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Funworld

MAY/JUNE 2024

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How China's Chimelong Group prepares, promotes, and executes seasonal events

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ON WITH THE SHOW:

Planning for Special Events and Holiday Celebrations

46 Celebrating with Chimelong
How China's Chimelong Group prepares, promotes, and executes seasonal events

54 Candy Cane Lane
Unwrapping how facilities plan and operate Christmas events

62 Curating Holiday Experiences That Resonate
Attractions worldwide harness trends and deliver new events

68 Fall on the Farm
How seasonal agricultural-based events are giving rise to permanent attractions in Illinois farm country

ON THE COVER: Chimelong Paradise Guangzhou produces spectacular Halloween events. Performers wearing intricate costumes captivate parade viewers. The Nine-Tailed Fox, as seen on Funworld's cover, dates back to Han esoteric storytelling. The character's long, bushy tails have many branches, each representing a level of power.

CREDIT: CHIMELONG

INSIDE | MAY/JUNE 2024

JASON DECAIRES TAYLOR

ASSOCIATION NEWS AND BENEFITS

EXPO PREVIEW

Unlock Success at IAAPA Expo Asia 2024 ... *32*

IAAPA FOUNDATION

Student Leader Voices Benefits of IAAPA Foundation Support ... *36*

EVENTS

IAAPA Honors Celebrates Excellence in Las Vegas ... *38*

EDUCATION

Explore IAAPA's Online Learning Portal ... *40*

MEMBERSHIP

New IAAPA Membership Options Available ... *42*

LEADERSHIP

Applications for 2025 IAAPA Global Board of Directors Open Until June 3 ... *43*

ALMANAC ... *44*

CALENDAR ... *45*

DEPARTMENTS

AD INDEX ... *82*

MIC DROP ... *84*

MAY/JUNE 2024
VOLUME XLVI • ISSUE 3

Funworld is a member benefit of IAAPA, the global association for the attractions industry.

IAAPA NEWS

Visit **IAAPA.org/News** for leading industry news in the IAAPA News Hub.

Launch

LIVE ENTERTAINMENT
Kiss of the Sea Innovates at Sun World ... *6*

DISPATCH ... *10*

REGIONAL UPDATES ... *12*

IAAPA RESEARCH
Attractions Survey Provides Insight Into 2024 Season ... *20*

IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCES
Roll Up for the Dream Circus ... *21*

EMPLOYEE BENEFITS
Herschend's Grow U Program Cultivates Opportunity ... *22*

WHAT WORKS
The Art of Aquatic Safety ... *24*

MOVERS AND SHAKERS ... *26*

WHAT'S NEW ... *27*

PEOPLE OF THE ATTRACTIONS
The Making of a Renaissance Man ... *28*

BUSINESS RESOURCES

BERK ENTERPRISES

73 Food for Thought
sourcing sustainable food and beverage products

PEPPA PIG CAFE

77 Big Results, Limited Budgets
How to successfully design on a limited scale

78 The Risks and Potential of AI
Identifying the most effective applications for AI

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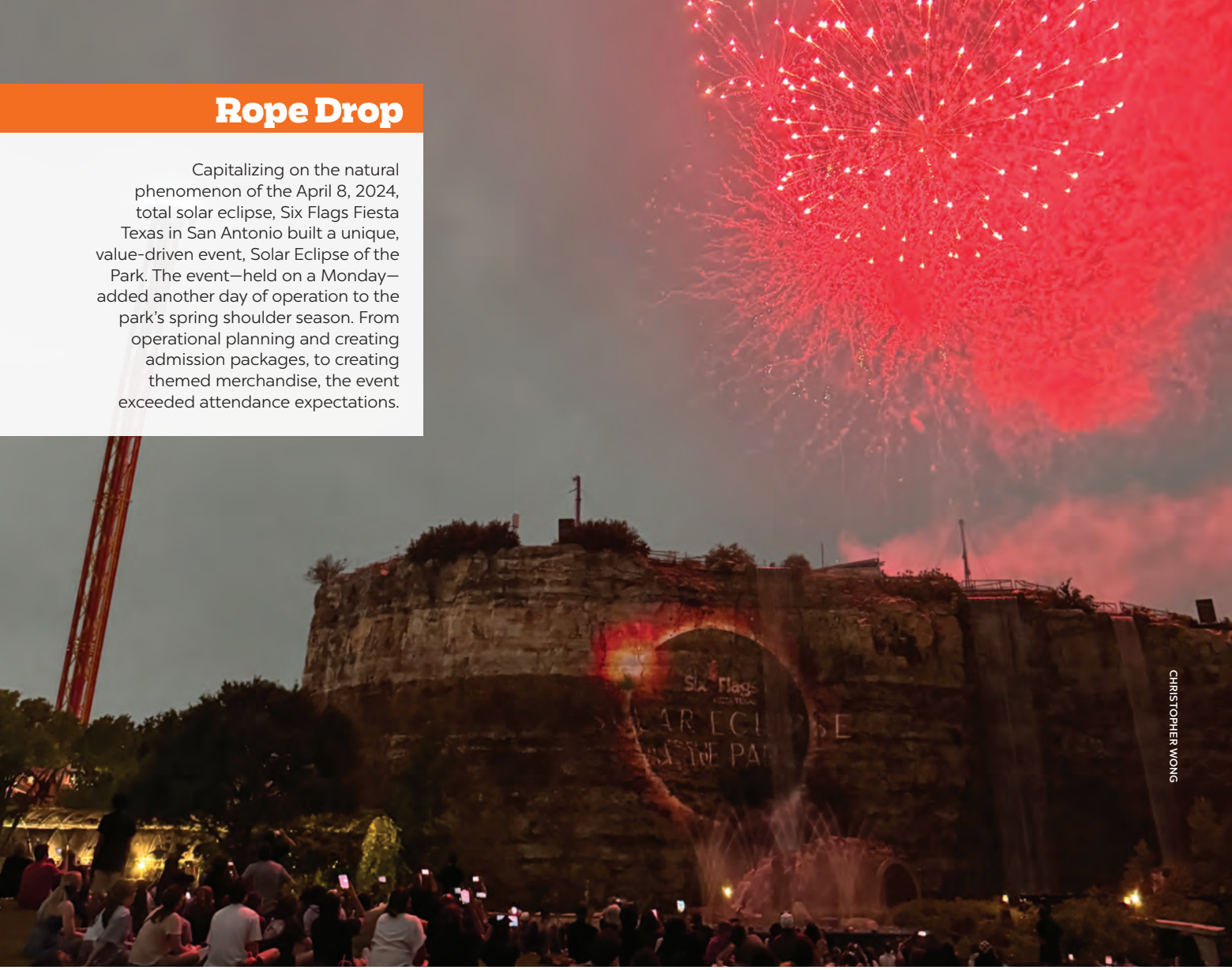
Rope Drop

Capitalizing on the natural phenomenon of the April 8, 2024, total solar eclipse, Six Flags Fiesta Texas in San Antonio built a unique, value-driven event, Solar Eclipse of the Park. The event—held on a Monday—added another day of operation to the park's spring shoulder season. From operational planning and creating admission packages, to creating themed merchandise, the event exceeded attendance expectations.



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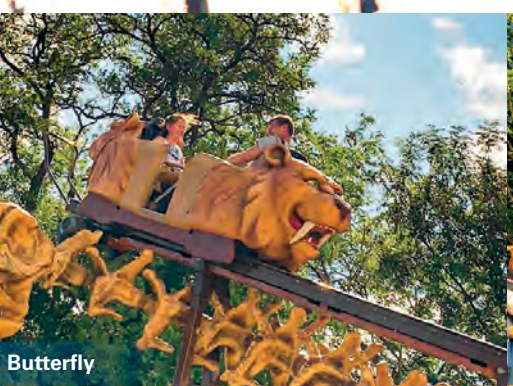
Butterfly

Tower

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Launch

ECA2

Kiss the Sea utilizes light and water to provide a striking visual experience for audience members.

LIVE ENTERTAINMENT

Kiss of the Sea Innovates at Sun World

How the show team overcame obstacles to bring cutting-edge storytelling to Vietnam

by Michael Switow

INNOVATION AND SPECTACLE CONVERGE AT VIETNAM'S SUN WORLD, where the relaunched Kiss of the Sea experience blends technology and artistry. A compelling narrative unfolds through awe-inspiring performances and special effects—all made possible by the show team's dedication to overcoming challenges in the pursuit of delivering a memorable experience.

Part sensory extravaganza, part Cirque-inspired performance, Kiss of the Sea is ECA2's largest production. The trilogy of arches, rising 30 meters overhead, provide depth and layers for the thousands of effects in the half-hour show.

Despite sets and transitions that appear to occur effortlessly throughout the performance, the vast scope of the production presented several design challenges. The most significant involved ensuring the 50-member cast is not dwarfed by the dazzling effects and scale of the set.

"I had to find a way to tell a story with performers on this stage and not lose them," recounts Charlene Munnier, the show's artistic director. "We had to find ways to make them bigger." Munnier and her team identified creative solutions: actors walk on stilts, performers twirl on illuminated hoops overhead, costumes are designed to flare outwards, and five trampolines are built into the stage for acrobats to flip and soar.

All of the water effects—more than 80 in total, including jets, geysers, and the 1,000-square-meter water screen—use saltwater. Five million liters of seawater are pumped and filtered for every show, then discharged back to the sea. While this approach is significantly more cost-effective and environmentally friendly, the practice brings challenges as well, from protecting equipment against corrosion to calibrating the effects accordingly. →

ECA2

The makeup and clothing of performers—along with the technology that surrounds them—were modified to withstand the abrasive effects of saltwater.

The flames from custom-made fire projectors, for example, take a different arc when they come into contact with seawater. "The conductivity of the water is not the same," explains ECA2 Chairman and CEO Jean-Christophe Canizares. "We had to adapt the equipment."

Saltwater also presents a challenge for the cast's makeup. While there are waterproof products on the market, nothing previously existed that could withstand the impact of salt without smudging or fading. ECA2 turned to the company Makeup Atelier Paris to create an entirely new type of saltwater-resistant stage cosmetics.

"It's almost like paint," explains ECA2 Technical Director Aurelien Bouvier. "And then they put an additional layer, like a varnish, on top of that."

Kiss of the Sea was conceived more than six years ago. The prolonged timeline—a result of the COVID-19 pandemic—spawned several questions and changes, including a venue location shift, changes to accommodate a more international audience, and debates around whether to include live performers. Supply chain issues forced ECA2 and Sun Group to adjust as well. Stainless steel prices jumped 80%, while the cost of the original projectors rose more than 50%, a considerable expense given that the show requires 31 projectors.

"These video projectors are big and made almost on demand. They are not stocked on the shelves," explains Canizares, who notes that the rising price of electrical components led their original supplier to hike prices, causing them to shop elsewhere.

Despite the artistic, technical, and logistical challenges faced throughout the show's development, audiences are now able to experience ECA2 and Sun Group's hard work in its full glory. The show takes place in the evenings on weekdays and during Vietnam's public holidays. FW

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1 BRAND EVOLUTION
NAME CHANGE

With an eye toward its centennial in 2034, the respected Brookfield Zoo and its parent organization, the **Chicago Zoological Society**, recently unveiled a new unified identity: **Brookfield Zoo Chicago**.

Old Logo

New Logo

The group says the new name and logo merge its conservation, science, and educational initiatives with the zoo experience. The new brand mantra, "Connect, Care, Conserve," is designed to invite the public to become stewards of the environment.

"In an era defined by climate disruption and biodiversity loss, our refreshed identity recognizes the significant impact zoos have on conservation of wildlife and wild places," says Dr. Michael J. Adkesson, president and CEO of Brookfield Zoo Chicago.

This summer, the zoo will debut its Next Century Plan, including dynamic new animal habitats; renovated facilities; classrooms emphasizing accessibility, inclusion, and participatory-rich activities; all while ensuring the attraction remains a fun recreational destination.

A full summary of the seven commitments is available at **brookfieldzoo.org/NextCentury**

2 NEW AND NOTABLE

WET ADVENTURES

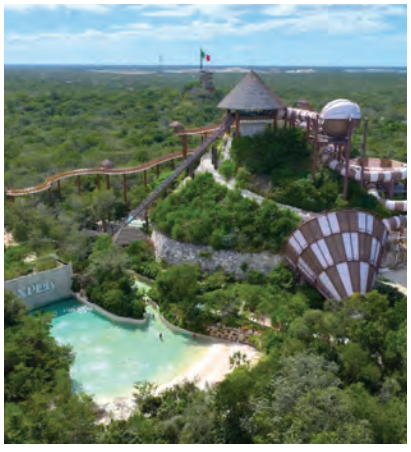
In the heart of the Riviera Maya jungle, **Xplor** in Playa del Carmen, Mexico, debuted its new water slide in March. Named **Toboganxote**, riders seated in a four-person raft (limited to 320 kilograms) start 41 meters above ground before navigating five different sections. The slide's splashdown pool leads to the park's new wave pool, where guests are encouraged to disembark and enjoy the waves.

THEMED DINING

New adventures at **Tokyo DisneySea** in Japan are slated to open on June 6. **Fantasy Springs** is inspired by the animated films "Frozen," "Tangled," and "Peter Pan." The menu at **Lookout Cookout**, a restaurant themed as a shipwreck, will include the Lost Kids' Snack Box. Featuring chicken tenders, seaweed fritters, banana chips, and shrimp chips, the snack pack is designed to be enjoyed while seated or on the go.

BURNING BRIGHT

What is old is new again at **Silver Dollar City** in Branson, Missouri. With support from **Rocky Mountain Construction (RMC)**, the park created a new version of its **Fire in the Hole** dark ride/roller coaster based on the original that operated from 1972 to late 2023. The new 3-minute-long ride features iconic show scenes, three gravity-driven drops, and an aquatic splashdown.



XCARET

DISNEY EXPERIENCES

SILVER DOLLAR CITY

3 TECHNOLOGY

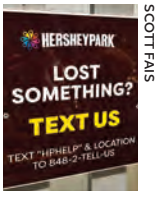
DASH AND **DINE**

SCOTT FAIS

SeaWorld Orlando has installed food scanning technology at select quick serve restaurants. Made by **Mashgin**, the scanner asks a guest to load their items under a camera. Artificial intelligence (AI) then scans the items and displays the cost. As a cashless park, a tap or swipe of a credit card is all that is needed before the guest can gather their items and exit. "This type of technology is allowing our guests to come in [and leave] faster," SeaWorld Orlando Park President Jon Peterson says, adding that the investment in tech allows F&B supervisors to focus on efficiency and cleanliness.

4 SAFETY

PHONE A **FRIEND**



SCOTT FAIS

Lose something? **Hersheypark** in Pennsylvania has a safety policy that enforces no loose articles on rides. Should a guest become separated from an item, signage positioned at the exit of several attractions features a phone number to text. The simple—yet effective—system allows visitors to connect with a Hersheypark employee who can safely help them retrieve their lost article. The number is monitored by the park's security team, who will quickly respond with further instructions, without taking a guest away from the fun.

HAVE A DISPATCH FROM THE FIELD?

Share your 2024 successes and operational innovations with Funworld. Send news, photos, and wins to **FunworldWorks@IAAPA.org**

5 SUSTAINABLE DESIGN

LONDON **UPCYCLING**

MCR

The **BT Tower**—standing 620 feet over London—is slated to become a hotel. Lodging developer **MCR** purchased the tower, its podium, and the encompassing city block from BT Group (formerly British Telecom).

"We will take our time to carefully develop proposals that respect the London landmark's rich history and open the building for everyone to enjoy," says Tyler Morse, CEO and owner of MCR.

BT Group will need several years to remove technical equipment before vacating the premises, first opened in 1965. Meanwhile, London-based Heatherwick Studio will begin reimagining the tower's use as a hotel.

MCR has a history of repurposing older properties, including the TWA Hotel at JFK Airport.

"We see many parallels between the TWA Hotel and the BT Tower," says Morse. "Both are world-renowned, groundbreaking pieces of architecture."

6 GUEST SERVICE

RACING INTO **GOOD**

Employee recognition takes the pole position at **Andretti Indoor Karting & Games** in San Antonio. Positioned near the employee entrance and outside the bustling kitchen, a bulletin board shares positive guest feedback for all crew members to see. When a patron uses an employee's name in a positive comment, an abstract is printed and pinned on the board. Those who successfully upsell an event or birthday party also receive recognition in the same space. Nearby in a kart maintenance area, a prominently displayed motto reads, "Don't aspire to be the best on the team. Aspire to be the best for the team."

SCOTT FAIS

TAMAN SAFARI BALI

Bali Theatrical Show Voyages Through Land and Sea

Varuna, a unique theatrical show that takes place onstage and underwater, is now open at the Taman Safari Bali wildlife park. A cast of 36 performers, including three mermaids, recount a tale of the Prince of the Sea in a 39-minute dining theater experience against the backdrop of a 1,300-cubic-meter aquarium filled with sharks, fish, and a bust of the Hindu god of the celestial ocean.

"Varuna combines paper animation, shadow puppetry, and performances focusing on sustainability and marine conservation," explains the show's director and writer, Peter Wilson.

Tickets to the show, which is performed in a 150-seat theater over lunch, are packaged with premium entry to the wildlife park and cost between US$75 and US$125. Taman Safari Bali is owned by Taman Safari Indonesia, which operates attractions in several Indonesian locations on Java and Bali.

tamansafari.com/varuna/

Puy du Fou Debuts First Experience in Shanghai

Puy du Fou is set to launch a new experience titled Saga City of Light, an immersive walk-through theatrical experience spanning more than 50 rooms and featuring a 150-member cast. Set in 1930s Shanghai, visitors—dressed in red capes—are guided by a mysterious butler as they meet hundreds of characters and explore their stories together in a thrilling life-or-death escape.

Puy du Fou created unique effects for the 650-million-yuan show, including life-size replicas of an 80-meter-long boat and train. The company will draw on its roots to produce a complex, realistic experience. All the audio equipment, including more than 300 specialized speakers hidden throughout the set, are from France; most of the lighting equipment is also sourced from Europe.

Puy du Fou expects 1.2 million people to visit Saga City of Light, which will span a 46,000-square-meter space in the Shanghai Everbright Convention & Exhibition Centre, each year.

sagashanghai.com

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GREAT WOLF LODGE

Great Wolf Lodge Eyes Additional United Kingdom Expansion

Great Wolf Lodge and the Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council in the U.K. have settled on an agreement in principle that paves the way for a new indoor water park resort in Hampshire, England. The proposed project, next to Basingstoke Leisure Park, would complement the facilities at the Basingstoke Aquadrome.

"While there are several steps ahead of us before we are able to confirm any future plans, a Great Wolf Lodge in Basingstoke would provide hundreds of jobs and offer a world-class leisure facility that would attract more than half a million visitors to the region annually," shares Jason Lasecki, vice president of corporate communications at Great Wolf Resorts, Inc. "We are grateful for the support of this endeavor from Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council and its Cabinet, and look forward to collaborating as we fully evaluate this opportunity."

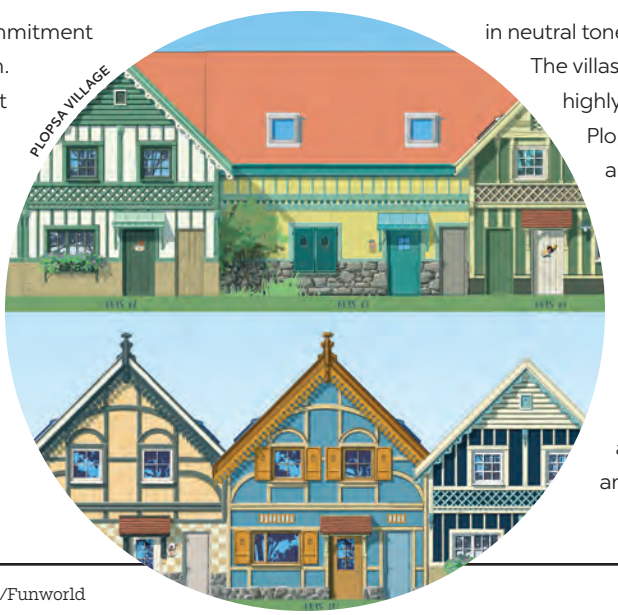
Great Wolf Lodge has already secured permission for its first U.K. resort at Bicester in Oxfordshire, England, where development is already underway. This represents a £200 million investment into the local community and economy.

greatwolf.com

Plopsa Plans Holiday Debut of New Villas in Belgium

Plopsa is doubling down on its commitment to grow as a destination in Belgium. Guests who want to combine a visit to Plopsaland De Panne and the Plopsaqua De Panne indoor water park on the Belgian coast will have the option to stay at 55 new four-star villas. Plopsa Village's first villas are slated to open on Dec. 21. The debut marks the culmination of Plopsa's €23.5 million investment in Plopsa Village.

The company has opted for elegantly furnished villas decorated in neutral tones to appeal to a wide audience. The villas' style distinguishes them from the highly themed rooms and chalets in the Plopsa Hotel, which opened in 2021, and the Plopsa campsite. However, fans of Plopsa and Studio 100's beloved characters such as Maya the Bee, Heidi, and Vic the Viking can still expect "subtle nods" to their favorites, according to Carl Lenaerts, CEO of Plopsa Group. There are six types of villas available, accommodating between six and 12 guests.



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JASON DECAIRES TAYLOR

Grenada Submarine Park Adds Sculptures and Announces Second Location

When the Molinière Underwater Sculpture Park opened to the public in 2006 off the southwestern coast of Grenada, it became one of the world's first. Led by British sculptor Jason deCaires Taylor, the park combines art and science to promote conservation.

In October 2023, 31 novel sculptures joined the marine protected area. Based on Grenada's culture and folklore, the work by Taylor and local sculptor Troy Lewis is part of a rehabilitation initiative planned for the park.

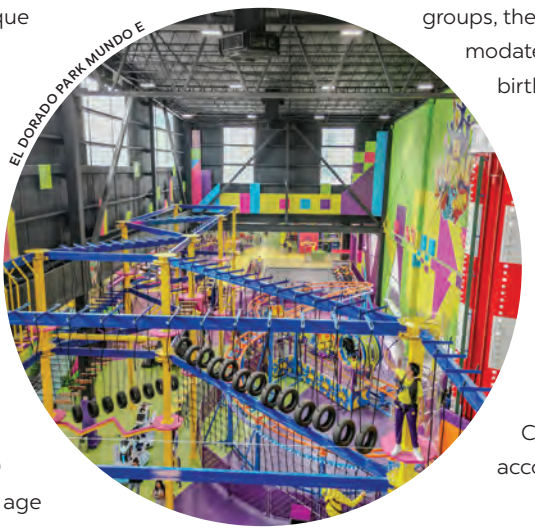
In addition to the upgrades performed to the underwater sculpture park, the Grenada Tourism Authority has announced plans to develop a second location. The new park will be located off the coast of Carriacou, a smaller island northeast of Grenada. Addressing environmental issues and the impact of the climate crisis on coastal communities, Taylor will lead the project with his proven expertise. Entrance fees to the park will help fund park rangers to manage fishing and tourism activities.

puregrenada.com, underwatersculpture.com

Mexico City Welcomes New Indoor Entertainment Centers

Scheduled to open in 2024, Aztlán Parque Urbano and its new giant wheel will take over the now-defunct Feria de Chapultepec.

Other players have also made their way into the family entertainment center (FEC) boom in Greater Mexico City. Last December, Mundo E shopping center witnessed the opening of El Dorado Park, a family amusement center combining rides, virtual reality, arcade games, obstacle courses, and other attractions. With an area of 3,600 square meters and activities for various age groups, the park has been designed to accommodate families, corporate events, and birthday parties.



EL DORADO PARK MUNDO E

Located near Mexico City's international airport, Inflandia Quack offers inflatable obstacle courses for toddlers, kids, and adults. Inaugurated in November inside the Encuentro Oceanía shopping center, the rubber duck-themed inflatable park offers hourly access and daily passes with unlimited time. Children under 6 years old must be accompanied by an adult.

doradopark.com, inflalandia.mx

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AREA 254

Quality F&B Defines New Texas FEC

Area 254, a newly opened family entertainment center (FEC) in Killeen, Texas, features a wide range of attractions, including bowling, roller skating, bumper cars, a karaoke room, an arcade, and a two-story laser tag arena.

However, the facility is differentiating itself by providing high-quality food and beverage options, including smash burgers, pizza made from freshly risen dough, loaded baked potatoes, and a 30-tap self-pour beer and wine wall. "We're really trying to put an emphasis on good food so that people will come and enjoy that, even if they're not participating in the other things," says owner Jim Lewis. Lewis adds that the mission of Area 254 is to create unforgettable experiences through exceptional service for guests each time they visit. "We want to create fond memories for people and their families and their friends, and create a spot where people can come and have a great time, leave their troubles outside, and just be immersed in a fun experience," he adds.

area254.fun

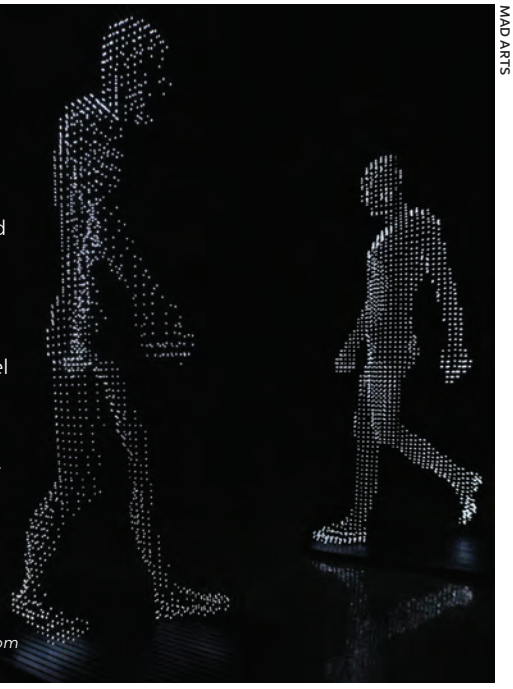
Mad Arts Brings a Visionary Playground to Florida

Technology project incubator Mad Arts opened the new Mad Arts Museum located in Dania Beach, Florida.

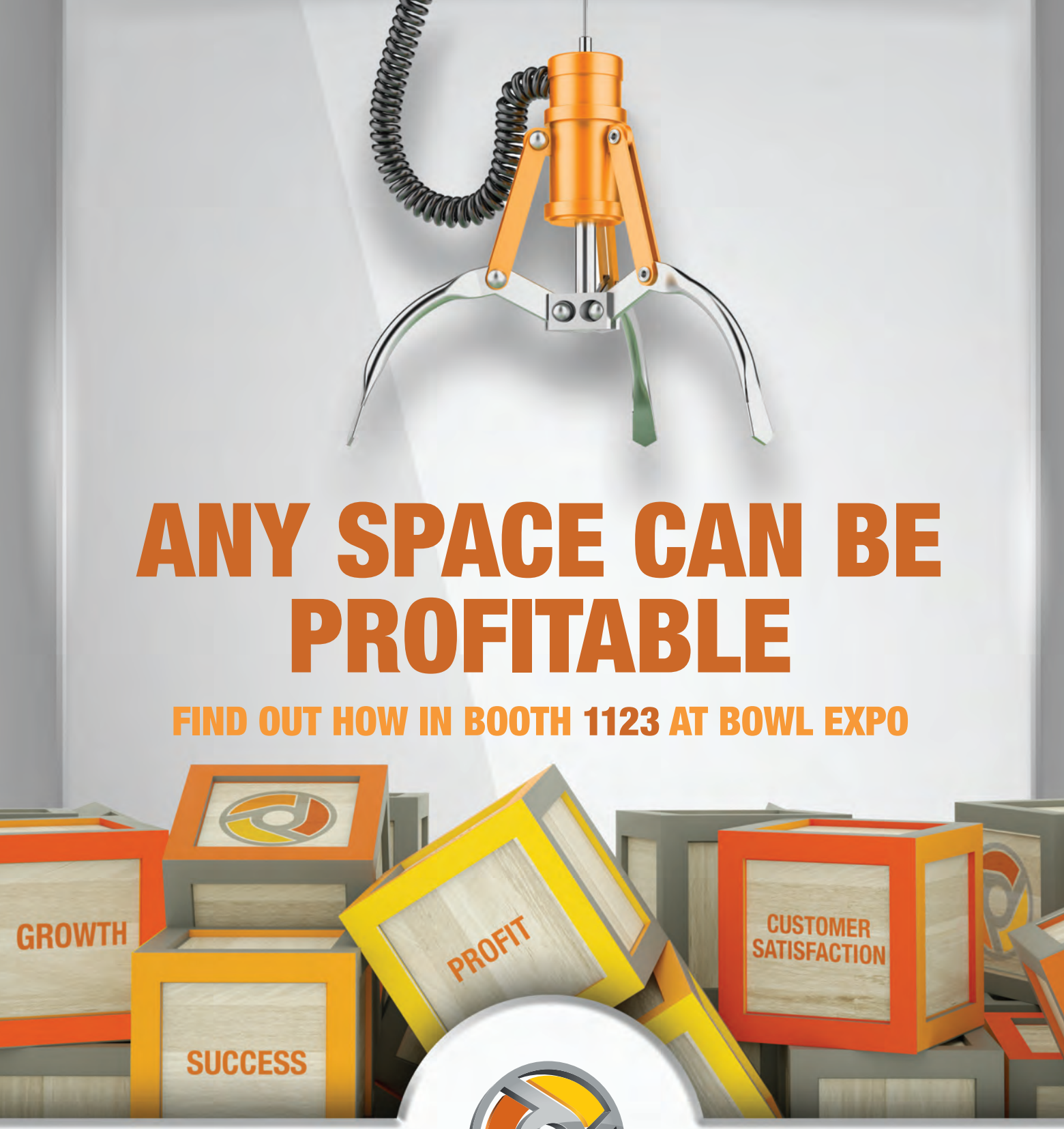
Billed as a dynamic and visionary playground, this two-story, 50,000-square-foot immersive art museum currently offers more than 20 exhibitions showcasing all types of artists, including three holographic projection sculptures by Studio McGuire; an immersive laser, sound, and water installation by JS Baillat, Ottomata, and Diagraf called "Laser Like Water;" and Résonances—an installation by Canadian artist LP Rondeau co-produced by Elektra and distributed by Wireframe Public Art.

"Mad Arts is the result of years of community building, inclusive programming, and a mission to dispel the myth that art is only for a certain type of person or group of people," says Marc Aptakin, executive director of Mad Arts. "We help artists at any stage of their career to achieve their vision by leveraging internal agency resources and funding."

yesweareamadarts.com



MAD ARTS



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Attractions Survey Provides Insight Into 2024 Season

Global conflicts, cost pressures, consumer debt, and lower consumption contribute to some uncertainty. However, expectations for stabilizing interest rates and slowing inflation were cited as positive factors. The insight comes from first IAAPA Quarterly Outlook Survey of 2024. Funworld spotlights sentiments from staffing and spending to attendance and revenue. Find the full results of the Q1 2024 survey at **IAAPA.org/Q1Research**.

Top 3 Opportunities and Challenges in 2024

Expectations in the Next 6 Months vs. Same Period a Year Ago

Percentage of respondents who expect each category to increase, stay the same or decrease.

Front-Line Staffing

Expectations for finding available employees

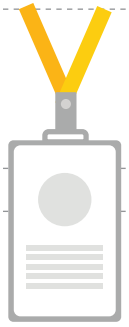
23% Increase

53% no change

Decrease 24%

Season/Annual Pass Sales

Estimated 6-month performance



50% Increase

22% same

Decrease 10%

*18% not applicable

Per Cap Spending

Projections for guest spending

61% Increase

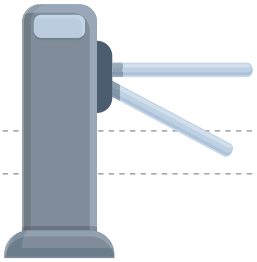
24% same

Decrease 10%

*5% not applicable

Attendance Outook

Projections for visitation in 2024



63% Increase

19% same

Decrease 16%

*2% not applicable

Revenue Growth

Expectations are high for revenue generation

76% Increase

No Change 9%

Decrease 13%

*2% not applicable

We want to hear from you.

IAAPA members are encouraged to take part in the Q2 2024 survey. The next survey will provide insight on economic outlook, business performance, trends, key opportunities, and challenges. Once registered, IAAPA members will receive the survey and instructions via email. Participants will also be among the first to receive the results. Visit **IAAPA.org/QuarterlySurvey** to register.

Q1 2024 survey took place from Jan. 11 - Feb. 5, 2024. 212 professionals participated.
Denotes the percentage of respondents who indicated the category doesn't apply for their business. To see the full results, visit **IAAPA.org/Q1Research.*
IAAPA members may access the survey results for free upon logging in.

LUNA PARK

Luna Park Sydney's new Dream Circus facilitates a whimsical and immersive environment with its more than 3,000 square meters of digital show space.

Roll Up for the Dream Circus

Luna Park Sydney's immersive attraction draws new audiences and increases dwell time

LUNA PARK SYDNEY IN NEW SOUTH WALES, Australia, has pulled off an amazing magic trick with its new Dream Circus, an AU$15 million reimagining of Sydney's Big Top. In the reimagining, audiences enter a digital dream world where they find a flying circus in the sky, an underwater spectacle with dancing seals, psychedelic universes, jungles, and a madcap roller coaster ridden by a clown—all from the comfort of their seats.

"Pushing creative boundaries is embedded in the DNA of our 88-year-old Sydney institution. Globally, we're seeing a huge surge in the immersive sector, and we decided that we wanted to lead the way," says John Hughes, CEO of Luna Park Sydney.

Dream Circus is a "digital circus from the future," an artistic and digital spin on vintage circus traditions, located in the historic art deco-era amusement park. The park began by revamping a 20-year-old entertainment venue on-site known as Sydney's Big Top.

"It was built as a multi-purpose auditorium, with complete blackout, soundproofing to 120 decibels, tremendous height, and excellent rigging capabilities. We were able to install a tech overlay consisting of 40 Barco projectors, a spatially mapped audio system with 100 speakers (featuring 10.1 surround sound), LED screens, and holographic gauze, with a complete automation system that turns the room into a magic box of technical tricks," Hughes explains.

The result is an entirely digital show with an active surface area of more than 3,000 square meters. Characters, including showman Pedro, a strongman, clowns, a magician, and a hypnotist lead guests on a tour through kaleidoscopic fantasy worlds. A soundscape with original songs, orchestral music, and sound effects enhances the 45-minute show. Dream Circus comfortably accommodates 350 guests, who can sit, stand, or roam around. Visitors spend, on average, an hour in the Big Top, including a pre-show experience.

"We assembled the brightest creative and technical minds for Dream Circus," Hughes says. "Lucy Keeler, Luna Park Sydney's head of Strategy & Experiences, steered the project. Our creative and production lead was Artists in Motion, led by Richard Lindsay, along with the great technical minds at Auditoria, Showtex, and Technical Direction Company (TDC)."

> "Now that we have the technology installed … we plan to curate additional immersive experiences in this space."
>
> — John Hughes

Dream Circus launched in December—in time for the summer season in Australia. Tickets cost AU$35 for children and AU$45 for adults (Luna Park Sydney has no admission charge; visitors who purchase a ride pass can benefit from discounted Dream Circus tickets).

"The Dream Circus experience is attracting a different audience to Luna Park Sydney and extending the stay of our ride-pass visitors who purchase a bundled ticket," Hughes says.

"Now that we have the technology installed … we plan to curate additional immersive experiences in this space. We're excited about using it for seasonal events, such as Halloween, Easter, and Christmas. Everything we do will complement our amusement park and stay true to our core principles of escapism, wonder, and joy." FW

lunaparksydney.com

HERSCHEND ENTERPRISES

All Herschend employees, such as the two Silver Dollar City team members pictured here, are eligible to participate in the Grow U education program.

Herschend's Grow U Program Cultivates Opportunity

Tuition-free educational program opens doors

Dorreen Novotny, human resources workforce planning manager at Dollywood Parks and Resorts in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, says that she has long wanted to further her education so that she could advance her career and become the leader she wants to be. Life, however, got in the way."Let's face it. At my age I don't want to incur more debt," says Novotny, who is raising a family and notes that she can't afford college tuition.

Nevertheless, she is pursuing her bachelor's degree in leadership and organizational studies thanks to Grow U, an initiative launched by Herschend Enterprises in 2022. The program offers employees 100% free tuition in a variety of educational programs. With the company's support, Novotny is on track to fulfill her dream.

"It means the world to me," she says.

Novotny is in good company among her Herschend colleagues. Of approximately 6,500 eligible employees, around 35% created an account and expressed interest in Grow U by the end of 2023. Nearly 700 of them were approved and began their educational journey. In the first two years of the program, Herschend spent $1.9 million helping its employees seek degrees, diplomas, and certificates.

Before launching Grow U, Herschend spent time analyzing employee needs and the adoption rate of their prior educational reimbursement program. According to Deanna Partridge, vice president of talent development, the company discovered the former program wasn't heavily utilized. First, it was only available to full-time employees. More significantly, employees had to pay tuition up front, which could cost thousands of dollars. Research showed that was out of reach for many, despite the company's offer to reimburse tuition.

Therefore, Herschend made a change. Now, all employees, including those who work seasonally, can participate in Grow U. The benefit is available on their first day of employment. Since Herschend covers the costs of tuition, books, fees, and supplies, employees don't have to pay anything out of pocket.

> "This benefit has really taken away the barriers for folks to pursue education that never thought they'd have that opportunity."
>
> — Deanna Partridge

"It really levels the playing field for anyone who wants to get an education," Partridge says. "The other great thing about [Grow U] is that it's intended for folks who are working," she notes, explaining that the courses are presented online and are flexible so that students can tackle them at their own pace.

The program is administered by Guild Education, which offers career coaches to help guide employees through the process and build a tailored educational plan. More than 30 colleges and course providers, including Wilmington University, eCornell, and Southern New Hampshire University, offer more than 100 programs through Grow U. Herschend also helped curate the curriculum to align with its businesses. Among the topics covered are hospitality, leadership, human resources,

business administration, and marketing.

Most Grow U participants take certificate or boot camp programs. However, earlier this year, more than 120 employees were enrolled in bachelor's degree programs with another 18 seeking a master's degree.

"I think this is a great program," says Katie Eighmy, an attractions supervisor at Silver Dollar City who is pursuing a bachelor's degree in tourism and hospitality management with Johnson and Wales University. "It means I can better myself for the future and for my career."

Offering employees the opportunity to better themselves is part of Herschend's DNA, according to Partridge.

"The company has always been rooted in our love strategy," Partridge says, explaining the rationale for introducing Grow U. "This is another way to truly love our employees." The program also provides the growing corporation with a pool of talented leaders to fill management roles. In a highly competitive marketplace, Grow U also helps distinguish the company and is a valuable recruitment tool.

HERSCHEND ENTERPRISES

Employees of Herschend's Wild Adventures, all of whom are eligible for the Grow U program, pose with characters.

The program serves as a highly effective retention tool as well. Rather than taking on college loan debt, high school students—who work front-line, seasonal jobs—can choose to remain with Herschend, further their education, and embark on a career path. Thus, Grow U is a win-win for employees and the company.

Partridge exemplifies the opportunities that Herschend affords its workers. She started working for the company in an hourly, temporary position and worked her way through the organization to the vice president level. Grow U, she says, gives employees a roadmap to follow in her footsteps.

"This benefit has really taken away the barriers for folks to pursue education that never thought they'd have that opportunity," Partridge says. "There's nothing holding them back." FW

OSCAR GARZA

The Art of Aquatic Safety

FOR OVER TWO DECADES, I've had the pleasure of serving the communities that I live in and have been entrusted with developing teams devoted to excellence. I'm honored to share a few key learnings that have been beneficial to the organizations that I've led.

Hire Well

Organizational success starts in the screening and interview process. It's important to seek candidates who are competent in the role, or willing to gain the skills, and more importantly, a great culture fit. Find candidates who truly care about the core values, mission, and vision of your organization, which should have guest safety as the paramount priority. We only hire candidates if they are a "slam dunk hire" that will bring positive energy to our work environment. In every interview, we explain our core values and immediately quiz the candidate about them. Our core values are also a large part of our onboarding process, our daily rotational schedules, and our annual reviews. I want every team member to be committed to our culture, and I believe it starts with a clear vision and tangible core values that team members can strive for.

I'm a strong advocate for being proactive and preventative in emergency situations—nearly every incident can be avoided with a vigilant and well-trained team.

Train Well

Operational excellence and having a world-class standard is a mindset that must be shared from top level management. Having a team that is eagerly learning and developing is a key for organizational maturity. A few ways we facilitate these learning opportunities are conducting weekly skills checks, having monthly team talks and training, and also facilitating a safety committee that everyone is encouraged to be a part of. At one point in my career, I worked in the mining industry. Every time we started a new task, we would "take five" to identify any hazards, assess risks, and put control measures in place prior to continuing any tasks. This is relevant in the aquatic and amusement park industry, as we are continually assessing and controlling risk. I'm a strong advocate for being proactive and preventative in emergency situations—nearly every incident can be avoided with a vigilant and well-trained team.

Invest Well

We are responsible for investing in our teams through education and growth opportunities, and we should pride ourselves in educating our team with skills and knowledge that will benefit them for the rest of their lives. If I have employees interested in marketing, PR, maintenance, or finance, then I will start pulling them into those meetings and give them space to ask questions. I also hold a consistent leadership meeting every week that begins with a focus on leadership development including Master Class learning sessions on various topics. Every year I take a team to IAAPA Expo and numerous other conferences, and this time together has proven to be invaluable to our overall growth as a business. A well supported team has translated to investing in our community as well. I believe in partnering with organizations that spread aquatic safety awareness with the end goal of drowning prevention, and our team participates in the world's largest swim lesson every year to help share this message.

Serve Well

Bringing the community together and finding ways to serve the community as a team is a passion of mine. Hosting large community events such as our Mega Noon Year Celebration, conducting food drives, and performing community service projects as a team have all helped drive a servant mindset. For the past five years we have done a large peanut butter drive benefiting Feeding San Diego, donating more than 1,000 pounds of peanut butter to our community in October 2023. We also host a Toy Drive every year and have donated thousands of toys over the years. I'm passionate about our teams serving everyone as a guest, rather than a customer, and everyone entering our business is referred to as a guest.

Excite Well

We are in the business of creating memories, and we must strive to give our guests the best possible experience. It's easy to ruin an experience over something that is preventable. For example, I believe that children come with a sense of innocence and want to have fun. Our first action to correct behaviors is to use our voices and get their attention, if they are unresponsive, then we will utilize our whistles, but I never want whistling at guests to be our default. It's also important to me to have a staff member open the front door for guests to greet and thank them at the end of their visit. Every day is an opportunity to try and make someone's day memorable, smile more, and find opportunities to share kindness. FW

Spencer Meinburg, general manager of Plunge San Diego, is an aquatics expert with more than two decades of management experience in various industries. In his current role, he reopened the historic Plunge San Diego in 2019 after a 5-year construction closure and built it to a multi-million-dollar business in less than two years.

Movers and Shakers

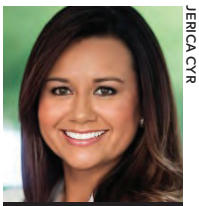
by Michael Switow

MICHAEL COSTELLO

Santa Monica's Pacific Park Acquired by SC Holdings

Santa Monica Amusements LLC (SMA), the operating group of Pacific Park on the Santa Monica Pier, has been acquired by **SC Holdings (SC)**, an investment firm with a strong background the consumer, entertainment, and hospitality industries. To enhance Pacific Park's offerings, SC Holdings plans to invest $10 million in the park's food and entertainment programs over the next five years. Jeff Klocke, vice president and general manager of Pacific Park, along with his experienced management team, will continue to oversee the park's day-to-day operations, leveraging their collective expertise gained from years of managing the park.

Promotion to Chief Operating Officer at Jeff Ellis Management



Jerica Cyr

JERICA CYR

Jerica Cyr is the new chief operating officer and vice president of **Jeff Ellis Management (JEM)**, which provides turnkey aquatic facility management for cruise lines, leisure destinations, municipalities, and resorts. Cyr has been with JEM, a subsidiary of Ellis & Associates, since its founding in 2003. "Jerica has been an instrumental part of Jeff Ellis Management's strength and success," says the company's founder, Jeff Ellis. "Our team and clients will be well-served by her care and commitment, which are second to none."

Red Raion Appoints Chief Brand Officer

Valeria Rizzo

VALERIA RIZZO

Valeria Rizzo is the new chief brand officer at **Red Raion**, a leading CGI studio for media-based attractions. "From the early days of 2015, Valeria Rizzo has been the heartbeat of our evolution, embodying the spirit and passion of Red Raion," says Red Raion co-founder and Strategy Director Antonio Cannata. In her previous role as business development director for Red Raion, Rizzo grew a sales network and team of content experts that have served more than 100 theme parks and family entertainment centers.

DOF Robotics Announces New Chief Commercial Officer

DOF Robotics has named **Burak Sar** as its new chief commercial officer, responsible for overseeing sales and marketing. Sar builds on his experience as the sales and design director at a leading water slide manufacturer. "I am thrilled to continue my career at a company with high ambitions for global expansion," exclaims Sar, who notes that DOF Robotics is actively pursuing revenue-sharing and investments in family entertainment centers.

Burak Sar

BURAK SAR

New Creative Director Tapped at Universal Creative

Daniel Pérez

DANIEL PÉREZ

Daniel Pérez is the new senior director of creative strategy at **Universal Creative**, which designs, develops, and delivers compelling themed entertainment experiences. Most recently, Pérez was the vice president of entertainment creative at Universal Studios Japan, where he led a team developing live entertainment, park-wide decor, and media-based attractions. Since joining Universal Destinations & Experiences in 2016, Pérez has directed projects featuring iconic brands like Curious George, Despicable Me, Hello Kitty, Sesame Street, and Jurassic World.

New Chief Financial Officer at Merlin Entertainments

Karim Hajjar

MERLIN

Karim Hajjar is **Merlin Entertainments**' new chief financial officer, overseeing financial strategy, investment strategies, mergers and acquisitions, and financial management of Merlin's 140 global attractions and resorts. Hajjar is new to the attractions industry but brings more than 30 years of financial experience. Most recently, he served 10 years as the group CFO of Solvay, a chemicals business, where he spearheaded record financial performance and contributed to the transformation of the company into two independently listed companies.

New Partner and Senior Vice-President at Gigantic Playground

Eric Soto

ERIC SOTO

Eric Soto is **Gigantic Playground**'s new partner and senior vice-president. In his 30 years in the industry, Soto has made significant contributions, particularly in system architecture, operational management, back-end development, APIs, mobile apps, and cloud deployments—all in developing robust interactive theme park systems. He has worked with a wide range of clients across the United States, including Universal Destinations & Experiences.

Roland Koch

Roland Koch, fondly nicknamed the "Host of Hosts" for his industry gatherings and hospitality, has passed away. His unparalleled commitment to fostering global relationships elevated networking within IAAPA and enriched friendships across continents. Koch also participated in the IAAPA Board of Directors and the Applause Award Board of Governors, generously offering his time to the industry—an endeavor rightfully recognized when Koch received an IAAPA Lifetime Service Award. Beyond IAAPA, his contributions to food and beverage in amusement parks, as well as pioneering innovations such as 180° and 360° cinemas in Europe, showcase his visionary leadership. "He alone has made outstanding contributions to the industry, but also the association," remarked Roland Mack in 2015. Roland Koch's legacy as an esteemed ambassador transcends borders, advancing the spirit of camaraderie for future generations.

JAKOB WAHL

Roland Koch

Lois Ann Lawrence

First as a Cedar Point employee, and later assisting all of Cedar Fair's properties, **Lois Ann Lawrence**, 80, made supply and design decisions, along with a lasting impression on all she met. Known for her quick wit, Lawrence worked with sales managers and engineers from global ride manufacturers in Cedar Fair's Planning and Design department for more than 35 years. She famously told the story of standing on the Cedar Point midway with then-Arrow Dynamics president and IAAPA Hall of Fame inductee, the late Ron Toomer, as the Gemini roller coaster began its first test run in spring 1978. "He kept saying over and over, 'It's not going to work. It's not going to work.' I told him, 'It better work—or you best be on your way back to the airport!'" Lawrence exclaimed. (Both were right: Gemini completed its first test run without fail, but later valleyed on opening day in cool temperatures.) Lawrence is survived by her children and boyfriend, Jim Colvin, Sr., Cedar Point's retired director of maintenance and construction.

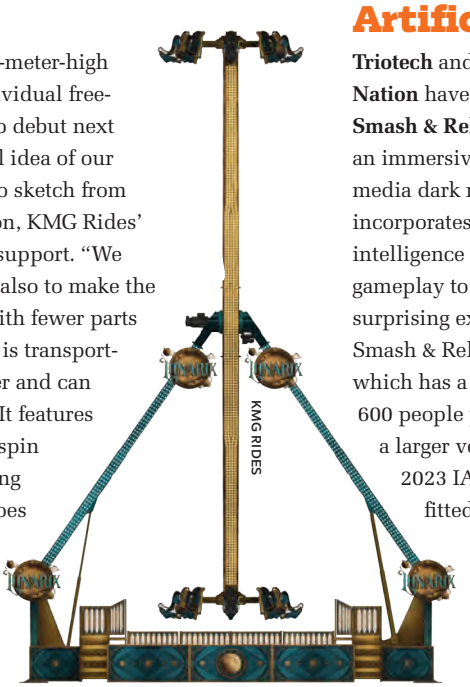
CANDY FRANKOWSKI

Lois Ann Lawrence

Swinging High with KMG Rides

KMG Rides' Lunarix, a 24-meter-high swinging ride with 16 individual free-spinning gondolas, is set to debut next year. "We used the original idea of our Inversion ride and began to sketch from there," explains Amy Kroon, KMG Rides' head of after-sales project support. "We wanted more capacity but also to make the ride easier to set up and with fewer parts to maintain." The Lunarix is transportable on a single semi-trailer and can be set up without a crane. It features newly designed seats that spin sideways, instead of flipping back and forth. The ride does not require water for ballast and has a lower power consumption than its predecessors.

www.kmgrides.com/en



Triotech and BoldMove Partner on Artificial Intelligence Gameplay

Triotech and **BoldMove Nation** have launched **Smash & Reload Maxi**, an immersive multi-media dark ride that incorporates artificial intelligence into the gameplay to create surprising experiences. Smash & Reload Maxi, which has a capacity of 600 people per hour, is a larger version of a 2023 IAAPA Brass Ring award-winning dark ride that can be outfitted with a new intellectual property called Voodoo Festival. Operators can switch between family-friendly and scary versions of the story, which can also be easily customized for VIP experiences, corporate events, and birthday parties.

TRIOTECH

www.trio-tech.com/products/smash-reload

by Arthur Levine

The Making of a Renaissance Man

GROWING UP, JON BINKOWSKI LIVED SO CLOSE TO SEAWORLD SAN DIEGO he could ride his bicycle to the park. So, he did. A lot.

"I pretty much lived there until I was old enough to work there," says Binkowski. At age 15, he donned the park's Wally the Walrus costume. Binkowski remained with the company for 15 years, eventually becoming vice president, entertainment for SeaWorld Orlando. "It was a dream job for me. I got the theme park bug and built my career off that," he says.

In 1989, Binkowski founded Renaissance Entertainment and took the show production and storytelling skills he honed at SeaWorld to parks and attractions across the globe. Among the company's many projects is Waterworld, which Renaissance designed under Phil Hettema's leadership. Opened in 1995, the popular, over-the-top stunt show at Universal Studios Hollywood has had considerably more (sea) legs than the movie on which it is based. Renaissance also produced "Pirates," a silly 3D movie starring Leslie Nielsen and Eric Idle that has played at many parks, museums, and attractions.

Binkowski's career took a detour in the mid-2000s when he acquired an ice-skating theater in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. He then formed a consortium with neighboring businesses to pool resources and seek funding to build a theme park. The ill-fated Hard Rock Park opened in 2008 and closed after one season—a victim of the Great Recession and other unfortunate circumstances.

"I was proud of what we created," Binkowski says, adding that he was profoundly sad when the endeavor crashed and burned. "I didn't crawl out from under my desk for a year after that."

With its compelling theme and inspired attractions, I thought Hard Rock Park was a tremendous achievement. Apparently, I was not alone. Binkowski says that folks from major Orlando attractions visited the park, deemed it fantastic, and subsequently reached out to him and Renaissance business partner Lisa Enos Smith with projects.

JON BINKOWSKI

Visual effects supervisor Salvador Zalvidea (L) and Jon Binkowski at The Bourne Stuntacular.

INSET: Jon Binkowski and Leslie Nielsen on the set of "Pirates."

The company went on to develop and produce a Pirates of the Caribbean-themed stunt show for Shanghai Disneyland that incorporates a vertical wind tunnel and simulates a tornado in an indoor theater. Renaissance also helped mastermind The Bourne Stuntacular for Universal Studios Florida. The live presentation combines live actors and physical props with high-resolution media, blurring the line between virtual elements and reality to an astonishing degree.

"With technology, we can make shows as exciting and visceral as a thrill ride but for a wider audience," says Binkowski.

Looking back on his long career, he says that he's something of an enigma in the industry.

"I never thought I'd have such high highs or such low lows," Binkowski reflects, referring to the Hard Rock Park debacle as "perhaps the biggest disaster in theme park history." However, he takes solace in helping to create "some of the most memorable attractions in park history" and promises more are on the way. Spoken like a true Renaissance man. FW

A lifelong park fanatic, **Arthur Levine** first started writing newspaper and magazine travel features about the industry he loves in 1992. He produces his own Substack newsletter, "Arthur's About Theme Parks" at AboutThemeParks.fun

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Association News and Benefits

32 IAAPA Expo Asia Preview

36 IAAPA Foundation

38 IAAPA Honors Recap

40 IAAPA Education

42 IAAPA Membership

43 IAAPA Leadership

44 Almanac

45 Events Calendar

IAAPA HONORS RECAP *p. 38*

IAAPA NEWS

Unlock Success at IAAPA Expo Asia 2024

GET READY TO DIVE INTO THE HEART OF THE ATTRACTIONS INDUSTRY at IAAPA Expo Asia 2024, hosted in the vibrant city of Bangkok from May 27-30. The Queen Sirikit National Convention Center will buzz with excitement as attractions professionals from around the world gather on the trade show floor to explore more than 320 exhibit booths from 30 different countries, discover the latest innovations, connect with international exhibitors, and gain valuable insights through inspiring EDUSessions.

IAAPA Expo Asia exhibitor MCSDINO displays its dinosaur puppets and animatronics.

"IAAPA Expo Asia is an unmissable global event for professionals in the attractions industry, and we are thrilled to introduce it to Thailand this year," shares Jack Chan, executive director and vice president of IAAPA Asia-Pacific. "Bangkok is a melting pot of culture and innovation, standing as one of the world's most eclectic destinations for travel and business, perfectly embodying this year's theme of 'evolution.' We look forward to debuting the very best the attractions industry has to offer in this remarkable city and having the opportunity to foster new connections and deliver exceptional educational opportunities to all our attendees."

Education Insights

One of the highlights of IAAPA Expo Asia is the wide range of educational opportunities tailored to meet the diverse needs of attractions professionals. From specialized training at the IAAPA Institute for Attractions Professionals to insightful presentations at the IAAPA Safety Institute, attendees have access to valuable resources aimed at enhancing their skills and knowledge base, ensuring they have the tools they need to stay ahead of the curve in a fast-moving, dynamic industry.

Attendees can look forward to engaging EDUSessions that cover a variety of topics, from accessibility and inclusivity to immersive entertainment and marketing strategies. Discover practical advice on creating accessible environments that enhance guest experiences, explore the latest trends shaping the future of immersive entertainment, and gain insights into the power of seasonal events in revitalizing attractions.

Engaging Experiences

IAAPA Expo Asia's offerings also extend beyond classroom learning, providing professionals unique field experiences, such as exclusive EDUTours to Pattaya, Playmondo, BeatActive, and Siam Amazing Park. These behind-the-scenes tours provide attendees with a firsthand look at some of Thailand's top attractions while offering ample networking opportunities in relaxed, immersive settings.

Growth for Young Professionals

IAAPA Expo Asia 2024 provides a platform for young professionals to connect, learn, and grow. With mentorship events, networking receptions, and opportunities to hear from industry veterans, those aged 18-35 can gain valuable insights and discover how to forge a path in the attractions industry.

Attraction Access

After exploring the full extent of IAAPA Expo Asia's offerings, attendees can take advantage of special discounts to major attractions in Thailand, including Siam Amazing Park, BeatActive, Sea Life Bangkok, and Madame Tussauds Bangkok. Attendees are encouraged to engage with the vibrant attractions landscape of the Asia-Pacific region while leveraging the benefits of IAAPA membership.

IAAPA Expo Asia 2024 is a must-attend event for attractions professionals looking for career opportunities, to connect with industry peers, and to stay ahead of the curve in the ever-evolving global attractions industry. Join IAAPA in Bangkok this May 27-30 to be part of the excitement!

IAAPA EXPO ASIA

Register for IAAPA Expo Asia today at **IAAPA.org/Expos**

IAAPA EXPO ASIA

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IAAPA®
The Global Association for the Attractions Industry

 by Avery Matteo

Student Leader Voices Benefits of IAAPA Foundation Support

Emily Sanchez, a student at San Diego State University (SDSU), makes a positive stamp on aspiring members of the attractions industry through her leadership of a student organization named Students Creating Rides, Entertainment, Attractions, and Memories (SCREAM), which provides SDSU students the opportunity to network in the theme park, live event, and attractions industries.

Opportunities provided by the IAAPA Foundation's scholarship program have allowed her to accelerate her career. Sanchez spoke with Funworld about the value of the IAAPA Foundation—and how it has propelled her leadership goals and career forward.

Discovering Opportunities

"I became aware of the IAAPA Foundation's scholarship opportunities through the invaluable guidance of our dedicated advisor, Lori Sipe," Sanchez explains. "With an illustrious career spanning over two decades in the attractions industry … she designed and facilitated the annual Institute for Executive Education for IAAPA. We are truly privileged to benefit from her knowledge and commitment."

Supporting Career Goals

Reflecting on the impact of her scholarship, Sanchez notes, "The IAAPA Foundation experiential scholarship significantly supported [SCREAM's] goals by facilitating interactions with distinguished professionals who are at the forefront of the attractions industry."

Sanchez adds that EDUSessions offer a unique value that she believes can't be replicated anywhere else, and she voices her excitement to wield what she's learned in the field. "I am very proud to be in the next generation of attractions industry leaders!" she exclaims.

Key Lessons Learned

When asked about the most important lesson she learned through an industry experience supported by the IAAPA Foundation, Sanchez highlights an EDUSession titled Empowering Women in

the Entertainment Industry: Insights from IAAPA Executives.

"The narratives shared by Aamna Jalal, Rani Bal, Carolyn Franks, Heather Barnes, and Fri Forjindam impacted me as a young minority woman who is navigating the industry. They discussed how to support other women in the industry without being too competitive against one another," she recalls.

Future Aspirations

After graduation, Sanchez aspires to specialize in the planning and execution of events within the parks and resorts of Universal Destinations & Experiences or Disney Experiences. "I've wanted to pursue this since high school, when I was the Commissioner of Activities for my ASB (Associated Student Body)," she shares. "My passion for curating memorable experiences for others brings me great fulfillment, and doing that within the attractions industry would be so meaningful. Engaging and seeing what the attractions industry has to offer through IAAPA reinforces my determination to reach that dream."

Sanchez's journey exemplifies the transformative power of educational opportunities provided by the IAAPA Foundation. Through scholarships and industry experiences, aspiring professionals like Sanchez are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and networks necessary to thrive in the dynamic world of attractions. As she continues to pursue her dreams, Sanchez remains grateful for the support she has received and looks forward to making a lasting impact in the attractions industry. FW

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To donate to the IAAPA Foundation and support students like Sanchez, visit **IAAPA.org/Foundation**

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IAAPA Honors Celebrates Excellence in Las Vegas

ON MARCH 3, THE VIBRANT ENERGY and shining lights of Las Vegas provided the perfect backdrop for a celebration of innovation and excellence in the global attractions industry. IAAPA Honors, hosted at the Venetian, brought together accomplished attractions professionals for a day dedicated to outstanding industry achievements.

The morning began with a welcome from IAAPA President and CEO Jakob Wahl, preparing audience members for a day of recognition and celebration. "IAAPA is a member-driven association, and we have long worked on this new IAAPA Honors event … We have great speeches, great presentations, great samplings of some of the winners, and it's a moment to celebrate," says Wahl in an interview with Funworld.

The event kicked off with an insightful keynote presentation by former Walt Disney World Resort president George Kalogridis, who highlighted the importance of cultivating a company culture that prioritizes innovation and creativity.

Panel discussions, such as "So, You Think You're Creative" and "From Ideation to IAAPA Honors: The SeaWorld/Hypersphere 360 Experience," were held between award acceptances, providing valuable insights into innovative shows and attractions. In addition, "The Art of Disney Spectaculars" and "Excellence in Storytelling" presentations provided glimpses into the development process of several award-winning attractions and experiences.

Attendees also watched award presentations recognizing excellence across various disciplines and categories, giving each industry niche a moment of recognition.

2024 IAAPA Chairman Wuthichai Luangamornlert praised the public acknowledgement of exceptional products, attractions, and experiences from across the globe that may not otherwise receive such visibility. "Awards are a way we can bring people from their obscure locations to the forefront, and we can honor them and let the rest of the [attractions] community know that they are doing a good job," says Luangamornlert.

During break periods between award distributions, attendees engaged in valuable networking with friends, colleagues, and new honorees.

PHOTOS: NELSON RODRIGUEZ

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As the day concluded, the festivities continued with an Evening of Excellence. Throughout the evening, attendees socialized and celebrated the IAAPA Hall of Fame inductees, IAAPA Service Award recipients, and the recipient of the prestigious Liseberg Applause Award, who were all recognized onstage.

The decision to host the first Las Vegas awards event was met with enthusiasm by attendee Chuck Fawcett, CEO of Allureum, who appreciated the opportunity for intimate interactions and valuable insights into cutting-edge projects.

"The quality of the people that showed up here is remarkable. And adding in the panel presentations and receiving a good behind-the-scenes snapshot of what's going on with these projects is always valuable for me. I focus a lot on technology in our industry—and what's new and cutting edge—and it was great to get those valuable nuggets of information," says Fawcett.

Attendee Megan Gannon, business development manager at Image Engineering, noted during the Evening of Excellence event that her first day with her new company was spent celebrating with colleagues. "It was definitely worth it to come here as my first day [working for Image] to connect with everybody, honor all of the award winners, and see the amazing offerings that Las Vegas has," she shares.

The IAAPA Honors celebration serves as a testament to the passion, creativity, and dedication that defines the global attractions industry. Attendees departed with a renewed sense of creativity and motivation, and the spirit of excellence will continue to inspire—elevating innovation to new heights. FW

To access the IAAPA Honors 2024 sizzle reel, browse event photos, and read about the award winners, visit **IAAPA.org/IAAPAHonors2024**

IAAPA Honors 2024 Winners

Human Resources

Best Health and Well-Being Strategy
Dolphin Cares

Best Innovation in Training
Lead/Go

Marketing

Best Digital Marketing Campaign
Passport to Summer, Typhoon Texas

Best Integrated Marketing Campaign
Uncharted – The Enigma of Penitence, PortAventura World

Best Social Media Marketing
Liseberg's Deadly Sins Horror House 7 Campaign

Best Outdoor Advertisement
Our Jobs are the *Splat*, Morey's Piers

Food and Beverage

Best New Menu Item – Annual attendance under 1 million
Clownfish Cone, Vancouver Aquarium

Best New Menu Item – Annual attendance over 1 million
Branded Mixology Program, Hershey's Chocolate World

Best New Food and Beverage Festival or Special Event
Bahamas Culinary & Arts Festival Presented by Baha Mar

Best New Food and Beverage Building Renovation or New Facility Build
Grand Pavilion, Cedar Point

Live Entertainment

Most Creative Atmosphere Production
Magical Creatures Encounter

Most Creative Christmas or Winter Holiday Production
The NutQuacker

Most Creative Halloween Production
Universal Orlando's Halloween Nightmare Fuel Wildfire

Most Creative Spectacle
Believe! Sea of Dreams

Most Creative Theatrical Production – Annual attendance under 1 million
A Pluma y Espada, Puy du Fou España

Most Creative Theatrical Production – Annual Attendance over 1 million
Le Mime et l'Étoile, Puy du Fou France

Family Entertainment Centers

Top FEC or LBE of the Year
Hasbro City

Games and Merchandise

Best Midway Game Display
Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk's Midway Games

Best Retail Visual Merchandise Display
Eldar's Specialty Shoppe, Enchanted Kingdom

Best Custom Retail Souvenir
Leviathan's Surprise Plush Egg

Brass Ring Awards: Best New Product

Category 1: Major Ride/Attraction

Class A- Product cost of more than US$3 million
Hypersphere 360 *(also Impact Award winner)*

Class B- Product cost of less than US$3 million
P'Sghetti Bowl, Skyline Attractions

Category 2: Family Ride/Attraction
Vertical Dark Ride

Category 3: Water Park Ride/Attraction

Class A- Product cost of more than US$2 million
Saifa, ProSlide

Class B- Product cost of US$2 million or less
AquaForms 12, WhiteWater

Category 4: Patron Participation Ride/Attraction
Krazy Darts, Lasertron

Category 5: Applied Technologies

Class A
Souvenir Video System

Class B
Harmony Helper

Category 6: Prizes, Plush, Retail, and Food Products
Icee Cherry 'n Blue Razz Ice Dippin' Dots

Category 7: Games and Devices

Class A- Arcade/Coin Op
Over the Edge, Unis Technology Ltd.

Class B- Midway
Inflatable Carnival Games, Magic Jump Inc.

Category 8 : Virtual and Augmented Reality
cycloBEAT 3.0 Indoor Cycling Activity

Category 9: Exhibitions, Thematic Displays, and Supplies
Froggy's Fog Gun

For more information on award nominations ahead of IAAPA Honors 2025 and for details on the IAAPA Honors 2024 award winners, visit **www.IAAPA.org/IAAPAHonors2025**

Explore IAAPA's Online Learning Portal

Attractions professionals eager to grow their industry expertise can access IAAPA's online learning materials through a series of simple steps. Spanning online courses, webinars, food and beverage training, and beyond, IAAPA's curated resources are designed to elevate individuals working in every corner of the global attractions industry.

To accommodate members across various countries and regions, IAAPA is in the process of translating courses into Spanish and Simplified Chinese. Translated educational materials currently available for purchase are notated as "Disponible en Español" or " 有中文版本（简体)" in the education portal. To tap into these diverse and valuable education materials, follow the process outlined below.

Step 1: Log In
In a browser, navigate to IAAPA.org and access the member account login by clicking on the profile icon in the top right of the screen.

Step 2: Navigate to IAAPA Online Learning
Once logged in, hover over the "Education" tab found in the banner at the top of the screen and select "Online Courses/Webinars." Next, scroll down and select "Online Courses." Select either "Attractions Industry Training," "Professional Development," or "EDUSessions" to explore each category of products.

Step 3: Browse Online Learning Products
Each tab allows for engagement with available online learning products. Click the product image or the "Learn more" hyperlink to view product details.

Step 4: Select Pricing and Add Courses to Shopping Cart
Pricing tiers are available for members, nonmembers, students, and young professionals. Select the most fitting price option and add the product to the shopping cart.

Step 5: Check Out
Begin the checkout process. An order confirmation will be sent after the purchase is complete.

Step 6: Access Learning Content
Learners can access their purchased learning content through the online learning portal site or by using the link provided in the order confirmation email. Then, select courses to begin and click on "View Files/Launch Training."

Questions? Email **Education@IAAPA.org** for additional support.

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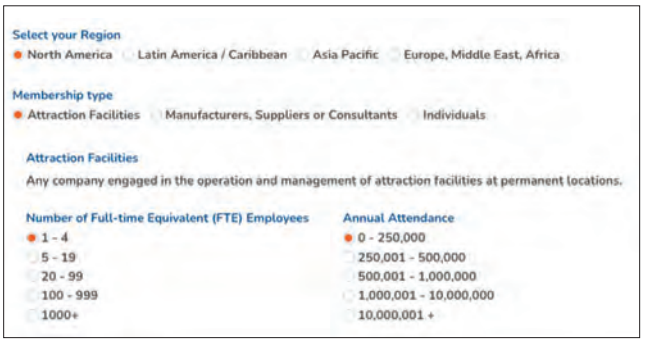
New IAAPA Membership Options Available

OVER THE LAST TWO YEARS, IAAPA has worked to refine the association's membership structure. Based on feedback collected from member surveys, the guidance of the IAAPA Membership Committee, the IAAPA Membership Task Force, and the IAAPA Board of Directors, individuals were awarded more membership options in 2022, followed by companies in 2024. Attraction facilities—as well as manufacturer and supplier members—may now select a membership tier that better fits the size of their business.

IAAPA member surveys have consistently indicated that the cost of membership could be a barrier to joining the association for individuals, young professionals, students, and small or fledgling companies. Individual membership options and new pricing options for attraction facilities, manufacturers, suppliers, and consultants make membership more accessible.

During the process of joining or renewing an existing membership, primary account contacts will be asked to indicate the size of their company based on two variables. For attraction facilities, membership dues will be based on the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) employees they have and the number of guests the facility serves annually. For manufacturers, suppliers, and consultants, they will also be asked to indicate a number of FTEs as well as the annual gross revenues earned from their activities in the attractions industry.

Members with questions on this new structure or the process of updating their membership records are encouraged to reach out to the appropriate regional membership team. FW



Explore the new membership structure at **IAAPA.org/Membership**

Applications for 2025 IAAPA Global Board of Directors Open Until June 3

IAAPA'S SUCCESS is largely attributed to the unwavering dedication and commitment of the IAAPA Global Board of Directors. Serving as a cornerstone of the association, the IAAPA Global Board of Directors plays a pivotal role in establishing strategic direction and ensuring effective oversight. It aligns its endeavors with IAAPA's overarching purpose, mission, vision, and core values. Embracing the diversity inherent in IAAPA's membership, the board maintains a well-balanced representation spanning different regions, industry segments, and companies of various sizes.

The IAAPA Governance Committee is accepting applications for the 2025 IAAPA Global Board of Directors through June 3. FW

JASON CANNON

To learn more about the IAAPA Global Board of Directors and to apply, please visit **IAAPA.org/BoardofDirectors**

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Insight from Industry Leaders

Global special events are the focus of this edition of Funworld. The IAAPA Oral History Project provides insight from legendary leaders who share perspective and best practices. Both Mathias Li, retired leader of Ocean Park Hong Kong, and Jack Herschend, co-founder of Herschend Family Entertainment, discuss how special events revolutionized their attractions.

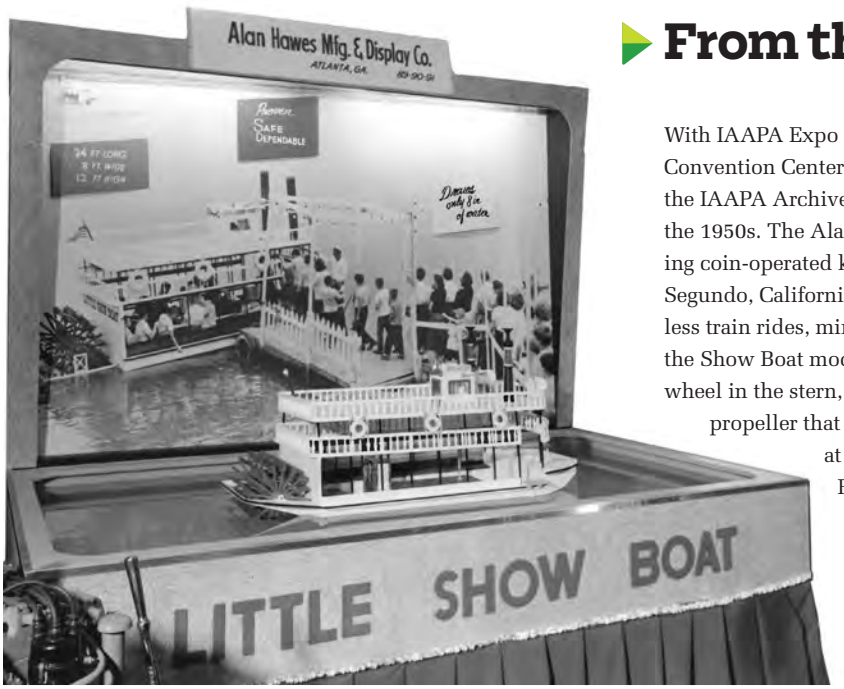
Mathis Li

On his way to IAAPA Expo 1994, Mathias Li stopped at Knotts Berry Farm in Buena Park, California, where Knott's Scary Farm captivated his attention. Named Haunt, the park's Halloween event inspired Li to introduce a haunted event at Ocean Park Hong Kong. The event helped introduce Halloween to the Asia-Pacific region. Today it is one of the largest Halloween festivals in the region, drawing more than 700,000 people during its run.

Jack Herschend

IAAPA Hall of Fame member Jack Herschend, co-founder of Herschend Family Entertainment discussed how Silver Dollar City's renowned special event lineup was a critical innovation in giving the park a unique identity. From food festivals to holiday events, and concerts throughout the year of all sizes, Silver Dollar City uses special events to attract guests to the Ozark Mountains.

From the IAAPA Archives



IAAPA ARCHIVES

With IAAPA Expo Asia taking place at the Queen Sirikit National Convention Center in Bangkok May 27-30, Funworld reaches into the IAAPA Archives for a look at trade show booth designs of the 1950s. The Alan Hawes Amusement Company started making coin-operated kiddie rides in 1954. Later, the Atlanta and Segundo, California-based company introduced monorails, trackless train rides, miniature golf courses, and riverboat rides, like the Show Boat model seen here. The Show Boat sported a paddlewheel in the stern, brass fittings, twin smoke stacks, and a hidden propeller that powered the craft. Alan Hawes' rides operated at attractions in Atlanta, Wisconsin Dells, and Farmington, Utah.

IAAPA EXPO ASIA

Make plans to source the latest products to help attractions grow at IAAPA Expo Asia, May 27-30 in Bangkok. Register at **IAAPA.org/Expos**

This is a partial listing of upcoming IAAPA events. Event details are as of April 10, 2024, and subject to change. For the most up-to-date information, visit **IAAPA.org/Events**

MAY 2024

IAAPA Meetup: Summit One Vanderbilt
7 | New York City

IAAPA Forum: Adventure Parks
8 | Online, Latin America, Caribbean

IAAPA Meetup - Denver Zoo
21 | Denver

IAAPA EXPO ASIA
27-30 | Bangkok

June 2024

IAAPA Presents - Silver Dollar City
25 | Branson, Missouri

JULY 2024

IAAPA EXPLORES

Sustainability
9-13 | Paris

IAAPA Meetup - Carowinds
9 | Charlotte, North Carolina

SEPTEMBER 2024

IAAPA APAC Trade Summit
4-5 | Shanghai

IAAPA EXPO EUROPE
23-26 | Amsterdam

NOVEMBER 2024

IAAPA EXPO
18-22 | Orlando

JANUARY 2025

IAAPA FEC Summit 2025
19-21 | New Orleans

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Celebrating *with* Chimelong

How China's Chimelong Group prepares, promotes, and executes seasonal events

by Michael Switow
Photos courtesy of Chimelong

AS A ROLLER COASTER INVERSION TWISTS IN THE BACKGROUND, a silent Chinese ghost adorned with an ornate blue and gold imperial headdress quizzes two young women at Chimelong Paradise in Guangzhou, China. Satisfied with their replies, the ghost places talismans on their heads—a centuries-old Taoist tradition to protect villagers from reanimated corpses. Later that night, on a round stage painted with eyes looking skyward, a trio of flame throwers dance and twirl amidst strobe lights, against the backdrop of a larger-than-life cyber-skeleton.

Chimelong Paradise's monthlong Halloween festival is much more than a collection of haunted houses, though they are popular as well. It is a massive celebration, with concerts, live performances, and ecstatic fans. Nearly 1 million people visited Chimelong Paradise during the 29-day Halloween bash in 2023. Ticket sales surpassed pre-pandemic levels, exceeding the 2019 watermark by 8%.

The Halloween spectacle is the biggest production of the year at Chimelong—with a budget of approximately $3 million, which is about 10 times greater than its other seasonal activities. However, Chimelong also runs other special events across multiple parks, nearly year-round, to generate excitement, attract visitors, and remain relevant.

"Chimelong Paradise is an 18-year-old park. It has a roller coaster and no IP (intellectual property) themes in the original design, so we stage a lot of themed events to make it more interesting for guests to visit the park," says Chimelong Vice General Manager of Entertainment Hans Lau, who oversees special events in four parks and three hotels in Guangzhou as well as a new forest resort that is scheduled to open later this year in Qingyuan, which is more than an hour north of Chimelong Paradise.

"We need to create talking points," agrees Raymond Lin, who leads entertainment for Chimelong's Zhuhai properties. "Chimelong Ocean Park is almost 10 years old. If there are no special events and just the normal routine, no one will bother to come back again."

Almost a dozen special events are on the calendar at Chimelong Ocean Kingdom this year, including a Pampering Festival focused on beauty, a polar carnival to celebrate Christmas, and a three-night New Year's Eve celebration. Lin often locates performances in less-trafficked areas of the park to spread guests out. His team also runs personalized experiences, such as the underwater wedding proposals from inside Ocean Kingdom's massive aquarium that are popular with young couples.

Planning for Safety

Back in Guangzhou, the Halloween experience begins before guests enter the park. At the subway station and in the resort's parking lot, Chimelong staff offer stickers and face painting for arriving guests. Pumpkin and skeleton stickers are free; more intricate designs cost as much as 298 yuan. Staff also provide cosmetic removal services because local regulations prohibit riding the train with scary makeup.

On some days during the Halloween season, as many as 70,000 people visit Chimelong Paradise, necessitating additional safety measures and special operating procedures. The park's 700 performers undergo weeks of training to learn their roles as well as safety and emergency procedures. Every member of the team learns how to use a fire extinguisher, how to de-escalate a violent situation, and where it may be unsafe to charge cell phones due to the risk of circuit overloads. More than 400 staff members—including wardrobe, show directors, and haunted house operators—are also taught emergency procedures relevant to their position.

On crowded days, perhaps the biggest operational change is that guests can only proceed in one direction; they are not permitted to turn back or skip between the festival's six zones. Cast members continue to engage with visitors on the side of the busy street, but they can also lead them to quieter areas to finish the interaction. Additionally, while cast members may gather guests in a circle on the street to teach them a dance or play a game on normal days, when the park is crowded, "Plan C" goes into effect—meaning that interactions are limited to one photo or a single sentence before performers move on to engage other guests.

Market Research

The vast majority of Chimelong's guests are teenagers. The team planning the event schedule, unsurprisingly, falls outside this core demographic.

"I'm over 40," Lau jokes, "so I cannot fully trust myself."

Recognizing this age gap, Lau takes core members of his team into the field, where market research becomes the key to ensuring that Chimelong's special events remain relevant.

"We visit a lot of different entertainment experiences—coffee shops, night clubs, concerts, shopping centers—from industries outside the attractions space, but with the same target group of customers," Lau explains.

Chimelong guests gather to enjoy shows, celebrations, and themed food.

Themed cafés, for instance, are particularly popular in Guangzhou. Among trendy spots are a Korean chain called Zoo Coffee decorated with zebra stripes and plush toys, a Central Perk coffee house straight out of the TV show "Friends," and a dim sum café named Highway Wang that serves osmanthus lattes and features a bright orange Jeep with a Michelin Man strapped in behind the steering wheel.

Lau and his team frequent the cafés to observe which ones resonate best with teens. Similarly, they study the music that fuels teen dance moves, the games that captivate them, the products that fill their shopping bags, and topics that ignite their conversations. In each case, the key question is, "Why? Why is this destination or product popular?"

For these answers, Lau turns to focus groups. He does not have to engage a public relations firm, though. Instead, he turns to Chimelong's performers, most of whom are between the ages of 18 and 22, for this research.

"We ask them to share their ideas, what they enjoy and why," he says. "They don't have to make a report or prepare a proposal. They can just speak casually about their ideas."

The goal is not to copy what's hot but rather to explore the forces that are driving trends.

"The reason why it's popular is more important than the product itself," he explains.

Lau shares an example from a Xi'an attraction called The City of the Tang Dynasty that went viral on social media.

"It wasn't a big production—just two guys with master's degrees dressed as eighth-century scholars, inviting guests onto a stage with a simple backdrop and asking them questions about the region's history and culture.

"It became incredibly popular, so much so that senior management suggested we have a similar type of Q&A performance on stage at Chimelong. But I felt it wouldn't translate well to Guangzhou—our history isn't as rich as Xi'an's—so I convened my team to understand why the Tang Dynasty show was doing so well."

After researching and several meetings, Lau's team arrived at a conclusion: The competitive element, which tested guests' knowledge, appealed to teens who wanted to impress their partners.

"They want to show off," says Lau, who applied this realization inside a new themed zone during Chimelong's Halloween celebration. Cast members dressed in the style of Old Guangzhou

LEFT: A Halloween-themed parade makes its rounds.

and Old Hong Kong challenge guests to complete a mission, often by answering questions about traditional melodies, culture, and characters. As in Xi'an, Chimelong's guests have an opportunity to show off their knowledge—but within a context that is locally relevant.

Flexibility Is Key

Before Lau joined Chimelong, he worked at an attraction that began preparing for special events nearly a year in advance. He argues, however, that extended time frames are no longer feasible in an era of rapidly changing consumer preferences.

"Maybe 10 years ago we could do that, but not now," he reflects. "We should not plan ahead too early. We have to ensure that we stay on top of consumer preferences as they can shift quickly."

Chimelong's special events teams begin preparing for an event six months in advance, but proposals are hardly set in stone. For the next three months, event concepts can undergo significant change, particularly in the areas of guest interaction and show experience. Characters can even be dropped or added. Set designs and decorations, though, are less likely to be modified once approved.

As an event approaches, even the day before, Lau and his team will make changes if they notice that a video, song, or meme has become popular on social media.

In resorts where intellectual properties are integral to an event, brand guidelines and lengthy approval processes may render this degree of flexibility difficult to achieve. Lau believes that this agility is a key differentiator for Chimelong.

"We do not have the biggest budgets or popular IPs," Lau acknowledges, "but we also do not have to go through a lot of red tape. We embrace change, even at the eleventh hour, and I think this is one of the reasons that Chimelong's special events are quite successful in China."

Creating Effective Promotions

Chimelong's marketing team begins work on publicity campaigns, including package deals with the resorts' hotels, six to eight months in advance. Promotions often feature fun, professionally produced videos for television and online broadcast, which complement more traditional marketing channels like outdoor ads. User-generated content plays a key role as well.

"In the age of social media, there is no more economical and effective means of promotion than to maximize the sharing desire of tourists with high-quality products and themed packages, so that every tourist who comes to play becomes a brand spokesperson," explains Chimelong Group Senior Counselor Tony Sze.

While creatives play a key role, at their heart, the marketing campaigns are data-driven, relying on a mix of internal information—like ticket sales and website traffic—and external data like industry trends, social media interaction, and competitor intelligence. After cleaning, integrating, and formatting the data, Chimelong arrives at user profiles, user behavior predictions, and sales forecasts.

Chimelong facilitates summer events that help keep guests cool during their visit.

With these profiles in hand, the marketing team articulates the promotion goals and strategies.

"The application of big data allows Chimelong's marketing department to understand the target audience more accurately and formulate targeted promotional strategies," says Sze. "At the same time, continuous optimization and adjustment of promotion strategies is key to ensure adaptation to the ever-changing market environment and user needs."

Summertime Fun

Special events not only encourage repeat visitation, they often generate business during off-peak periods.

Summers, for instance, used to be an unpopular time to visit Chimelong Paradise. With temperatures regularly exceeding 100 F, guests preferred playing in Chimelong's water park. If they did visit the amusement park, they rushed to its indoor 4D theater. To address the attendance slump, Lau introduced Summer Splash in 2021. He transformed the parade, adding bubble-makers and water cannons to the floats. Cast members with high-powered squirt guns take aim at poncho-wearing park-goers, many of whom have purchased their own water toys in the park and are replenishing them in fruity troughs that Chimelong has strategically placed along the route. Stage performers, dozens of misting jets, and cast members who instigate a conga line add to the festive atmosphere that's performed three times a day.

At Chimelong Safari Park, home to more than 20,000 animals, including white tigers, black langurs, and a giant panda, Chimelong understands that the wildlife will always be the primary draw, yet special events still add another dimension to enhance the visitor experience.

Two years ago, Chimelong added an annual celebration to the safari park's calendar. Chimelong hired nearly 70 performers from Kenya and other sub-Saharan countries to recreate an African village in the Guangzhou park, complete with drumming, interactive dancing, snacks, and ceremonies. In 2022, the impact on attendance was negligible, though this was still during the pandemic period. In 2023, ticket sales for the safari park tripled from the year earlier, recording 631,000 guests—which is also 20% above pre-pandemic attendance levels. This year, Chimelong is replacing the African village with a new concept to celebrate the 10th birthday of the park's panda. A Panda Village, with animation, a "panda catwalk," bamboo instruments, and images of other animals who will attend the panda's birthday party are all featured. FW

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ON WITH THE SHOW:

Planning for Special Events and Holiday Celebrations

From concerts and food festivals to holidays and parades, special events at attractions can drive attendance—and revenue. In this special section, Funworld shares advice from special event planners, insight from thought leaders, and examples of what works from events around the world.

WRAPPING CHRISTMAS EVENTS
P. 54

HOLIDAYS AROUND THE WORLD
P. 62

FALL ON THE FARM
P. 68

Candy Cane Lane

Unwrapping how facilities plan and operate Christmas events

by Scott Fais

FOR MANY GUESTS, THE TRADITION OF GOING "over the river and through the woods" during the holiday season includes making memories at an attraction. Although planning for Christmas while spring flowers are in bloom may seem odd, experts say waiting until the snow flies is too late.

"If companies need to purchase large quantities of lights or ornaments or very large trees, they will need to get their orders in very early—or pay a premium price—as most of these items are made in other countries," says Scott Swenson, owner of Scott Swenson Creative Development, who has planned Christmas events at Busch Gardens Tampa, the Indianapolis Zoo, and The Franklin Institute.

"I often think of Christmas as steady lifelong friend—always there, always consistent, and shows up every year," says Brian Morrow, owner of B Morrow Productions. Morrow believes the industry is seeing four growth trends in Christmas events:

- Existing festivals and experiences reinventing or growing capacity.
- Existing facilities looking to upgrade product into story-driven experiences.
- Attractions looking to drive attendance in the fourth quarter offering new festivals in their markets.
- New holiday experiences focused on original, winter-themed stories involving intellectual property (IP).

Funworld puts readers in the driver's seat as we plot a course between holiday events through the Eastern U.S. Facility owners and operators may use this roadmap when learning how operators—of all sizes and backgrounds—have successfully programmed events in November and December.

JOY THROUGH THE GROVE

Knoebels Amusement Resort

Elysburg, Pennsylvania

Family owned and operated for four generations

SCOTT FAIS

Meandering through a snowcapped amusement park aglow from inside the family car defines Joy Through the Grove at Knoebels. Guests drive their personal vehicles down the park's main boulevard before turning into Knoebels' campground to complete the 2-mile route. Along the way, they pass more than 500 light sculptures and displays.

"As far as the operation, it doesn't take a tremendous amount which is a beautiful thing about the season," says Trevor Knoebel, a fourth- generation operator.

The park's existing infrastructure assists the facility when extending the operating calendar to New Year's Eve. Power is provided by electrical hookups already in place at nearly 200 campsites. Knoebels adds portable restrooms along the way for guests who need to make a pit stop. During the event's first season in 2020, park leaders also learned they needed another amenity: gasoline.

"The lines were long…and some guests encountered low fuel levels in the parking lot," explains Jon Slodysko, Knoebel's operations manager. As a gift, the park's maintenance team will fill disabled vehicles with fuel or antifreeze or jump-start a dead battery. The route features signage with a distress phone number that guests may use should they need to call for help.

Planning for Joy Through the Grove begins in January when the Knoebels' team discusses what worked during the previous event and selects new sculptures for the next season. Creative Director Lauren Moscato, also a fourth-generation family member, says generic light displays are sourced from supplier Holiday Light Store, while custom pieces are fabricated by the park's carpenters and metalworkers. Come February, attention is placed on the upcoming summer.

"Usually by midsummer or late summer, we're like, 'Christmas is coming; we'd better start thinking about this again,'" Knoebel says.

The park will use up to 30 full-time and seasonal employees to set the lighted scenes between Halloween and the American Thanksgiving holiday.

"We have a solid, hectic, three and a half weeks of go-go-go," Knoebel says. "By the end of that third week, it's starting to look like something—it's pretty incredible."

Once the event opens, a dozen employees are needed nightly to take tickets, sell snacks, and assist immobile vehicles if needed.

"Limiting our nightly overhead has allowed us to expand the Knoebels experience further throughout the year," Knoebel concludes.

SCOTT FAIS

FUNWORLD TV DIGITAL EXTRA

MORE JINGLE AHEAD

Beginning May 1, go for a drive through Joy Through the Grove in the IAAPA News Hub. Video coverage includes how the Knoebel family expanded and opened a partner attraction at the park's nearby golf course. Watch the story at **IAAPA.org/ChristmasEvent**

2

HERSHEYPARK CHRISTMAS CANDYLANE

Hersheypark

Hershey, Pennsylvania

Hershey Entertainment and Resorts Company

SCOTT FAIS

For more than 40 years, Hersheypark has ended its season with a transformation into Christmas Candylane.

"We take very seriously that we are part of holiday traditions," says Quinn Bryner, director of public relations. "When you walk through these streets, you're going to see things that you would have gotten to do generations ago."

Beginning on November weekends, the park opens in the afternoon as rides, treats, nine live reindeer, and more than 5 million lights greet visitors.

"It takes our teams weeks to do, but it all pays off when we see our guest's reaction," says Bryner of the light displays, including the 50-foot-tall "Kissmas Tree" with a Hershey's Kiss adorning the top.

The indoor Laff Trakk roller coaster also features a large Christmas tree in the center and a driving holiday soundtrack. Dry Gulch Railroad and the Skyview cable car ride also transport riders through layers of lights. The park works with its roller coaster and ride manufacturers to safely determine what rides may operate in cold temperatures.

Hersheypark also leverages its recognizable food brands to create memorable tastes. "We start planning each holiday about four months ahead," explains Cher Harris, corporate executive chef at Hersheypark. In mid-summer, Harris will gather the food and beverage (F&B) team, the finance department, and staff from the foods warehouse to collaborate on one complex question: "What is going to intrigue our guest?" Next comes an analysis of what flavors are popular and how Hersheypark's culinary team can invent unique treats. "We want to make it super fun and interesting—and a little above what they would expect coming to a theme park."

That includes piping (icing) that looks like a poinsettia sitting atop a cupcake, a pumpkin cheesecake infused with espresso to give it a latte flavor, along with Gobbler Pizza. The slice features turkey, mashed potatoes, and corn, with a side of cranberry sauce and gravy. "Everyone loves Thanksgiving dinner. You would never think mashed potatoes on a pizza would be good, but we're pleasantly surprised that worked out really well." In fact, it worked so well, Hersheypark began putting the toppings on hot dogs and inside grilled cheese sandwiches. The Carrousel Bar at the posh Chocolatier restaurant offers a flight of chocolate and peppermint martinis. "You know you're going to be well-fed when you're here," Bryner concludes.

SCOTT FAIS

HERSHEY PARK

FUNWORLD TV DIGITAL EXTRA

SWEET EXTRA

On May 8, see Christmas Candylane in the IAAPA News Hub. Video coverage includes how Hersheypark operates the event and designs menus. Visit **IAAPA.org/ChristmasEvent**

DUTCH WONDERLAND

3

DUTCH WINTER WONDERLAND

Dutch Wonderland

Lancaster, Pennsylvania

Palace Entertainment

Rooted in child's play, family theme park Dutch Wonderland differentiates its holiday event by starting early, at 3 p.m.—just after naptime. Since many younger guests will visit before sunset, the park creates a schedule featuring more than just lights after dark.

Twenty rides rated for operation in cold temperatures by their manufacturers will safely run, while special live entertainment offerings—like puppet shows and dance parties—captivate families.

The castle-themed restaurant at the front gate will open early for a dine-with-Santa buffet. Kris Kringle, Mrs. Claus, and the park's mascot, a lovable purple dinosaur named Duke, will pose for photos.

Additional photos with Santa take place inside Santa's Jolly Lodge, a cabin where only one family is admitted at a time. The park found that this rhythm allowed children to have quiet, one-on-one time with St. Nick without distraction.

Quiet walking trails with landscaping covered in lights join fire pits, where guests can purchase do-it-yourself s'mores kits. To keep the experience safe for all, Dutch Wonderland hires an off-duty firefighter to keep an eye on the activities. Marketing the event is rooted in social media.

"Honestly, we go through a lot of word-of-mouth," explains Courtney Burkarth, marketing director. Burkarth will scour social channels, find positive reviews, and share cute photos and videos—with permission. "I think seeing genuine families having an amazing time is the best voucher for the experience."

In late 2023, the park leveraged Dutch Winter Wonderland as an incentive to purchase a 2024 season pass. Those who purchased a 2024 pass early received admission in December as a bonus.

DUTCH WONDERLAND

DUTCH WONDERLAND

FUNWORLD TV DIGITAL EXTRA

MORE WONDERLAND

Starting May 15, discover more about Dutch Winter Wonderland in the IAAPA News Hub. Video coverage includes an additional look at live entertainment. Visit **IAAPA.org/ChristmasEvent**

WINTERFEST

Kings Dominion

Doswell, Virginia

Cedar Fair Entertainment Company

4

KINGS DOMINION

Standing 300 feet tall, the Eiffel Tower at Kings Dominion is a festive beacon covered in computer-programmed LED globes that can be seen for miles as the centerpiece of WinterFest.

The event opens around sunset as the park glows in millions of lights. Contractors begin installing the lights in August, even before Kings Dominion's Halloween decor comes out.

Nathan Rankin, area supervisor of entertainment creative services, explains collaboration is the key between departments.

"Our amazing merchandise team gives us some of their retail locations to transform into some of our Winterfest attractions," Rankin says. A souvenir store during the regular season transforms into Mrs. Claus' Kitchen, where children can decorate cookies alongside an actress playing the role of Mrs. Claus. The live entertainment and merchandise teams will also work together to build creative window dressings. "We collaborate, putting our creative minds together," Rankin says.

The park's most prominent attraction is ice skating on the fountain stretching the length of International Street. Named "Snowflake Lake," three skating sessions nightly allow guests to rent skates for an additional fee before taking the ice. (A Zamboni will recondition the ice between each session.)

With F&B playing a larger role at attractions, Executive Chef Maurice Wilson has made a name for himself by getting creative.

"We like to use a lot of things that are local, fresh, and seasonal," Wilson tells Funworld. His seasonal menu includes favorites—with a twist. Funnel cakes are served with peppermint crumbles, while the doughy cinnamon pull apart bread receives extra attention during WinterFest.

"We have deep-fried pull apart bread, which we take the cinnamon bread and dip it in funnel cake batter—it's decadent. We fry it, bring it up, dust it with powdered sugar and a little bit of glaze," Wilson shares.

An onsite smoker allows the park to offer what Wilson calls "low and slow" holiday favorites like smoked turkey breast and brisket smoked for 16 hours, while mashed potatoes are made from scratch.

WinterFest concludes on New Year's Eve when the park stays open until 1 a.m. to usher in the next year.

And as Rankin says, the park is already working on Christmas 2024. "Right as the event opens, we're already planning things that we can make our event bigger and better for even next year."

KINGS DOMINION

FUNWORLD TV DIGITAL EXTRA

ADDITIONAL WINTERFEST

On May 22, the IAAPA News Hub presents video coverage of Winterfest. Discover the lengths the park goes to when creating specialty F&B menus and stage performances. Visit **IAAPA.org/ChristmasEvent**

BUSCH GARDENS WILLIAMSBURG

5

CHRISTMAS TOWN

Busch Gardens Williamsburg
Williamsburg, Virginia
United Parks & Resorts

Since its launch in 2009, Christmas Town at Busch Gardens Williamsburg has amassed more than 10 million lights. When does the park start hanging lights? April. "It's a relatively easy, low-impact element that we can add to a building that doesn't necessarily detract from the regular-year appearance, but it does give us the leg up on having the elements in place," explains Matthew Edwards, entertainment events manager at Busch Gardens Williamsburg. "Then all we got to do is turn the power on when we get to Christmas."

Planning for the first Christmas Town began in 2007—two years before the park rolled out the event. Edwards says the timeline the park created years ago still serves as a guidebook as to what elements need refurbished or replaced.

"There were many people and many brains that sort of developed what does it look like for these products to be outside in the elements that have the UV degradation, the rain, the snow, the sleet, whatever it is that impacts them," he says, adding most items need refurbished or replaced every three years.

Busch Gardens Williamsburg will use a mix of in-house staff and outsource the labor needed to install decor elements.

"It doesn't necessarily have to be highly skilled labor, per se, you just need hands," Edwards says of those who will climb ladders and use lifts attending to garland, signage, and lights.

Edwards says elements like a Christmas tree or a building with programmable pixel mapping lights is a trend. At Busch Gardens Williamsburg, the tree in front of the Festhaus puts on a show several times a night, while the lights attached to the show building and flume of the Escape from Pompeii water ride also perform for guests. Both areas feature a large plaza where guests can gather. The Busch Gardens Railway features a 20-minute-long journey where passengers are invited to participate in a singalong while passing lights and displays. The park also uses LED lights around the top of the gondolas of its Aeronaut Skyride.

So, how long does it take to remove the Christmas decor? Just 22 days in January. "We have about three weeks … to get everything struck, put away, send to refurb, or send to the warehouses and then have the park ready to go for the next event, which was Mardi Gras," Edwards concludes with a smile.

BUSCH GARDENS WILLIAMSBURG

BUSCH GARDENS WILLIAMSBURG

FUNWORLD TV DIGITAL EXTRA

CHRISTMAS COMES TO TOWN

Starting May 29, the IAAPA News Hub shares entertainment best practices found at Christmas Town. Watch the video story at **IAAPA.org/ChristmasEvent**

CHRISTMAS WILD & BRIGHT

Wild Adventures

Valdosta, Georgia

Herschend Family Entertainment

SCOTT FAIS

Using the park's 500 animals as inspiration, Wild Adventures launched a new holiday event in 2023 with the marquee Christmas Wild & Bright. The centerpiece of the event is a floating network of seven towering Christmas trees positioned in the park's lake.

Jon Vigue, vice president and general manager of the property, says his team in Georgia had several key learnings in the inaugural year.

"It was just a huge undertaking—not just by our team—but our creative studio at Herschend Family Entertainment, and also the many contractors that helped get this lifted off the ground," Vigue tells Funworld. Lights first went up in August, and Vigue says "it wasn't early enough. I think we have to reevaluate our timeline." Yet, the event reflected the spirit of the season.

The seven floating trees create a mirror effect after dark, creating an illusion of 14 trees. During operating nights, the "Carol of the Animals" pixel mapping show brings the trees to life, displaying animals using LEDs embedded in the façade of the trees.

Using the park's rural setting to its advantage, a half-mile nature walk and boardwalk extending into a native Georgia swamp is positioned as a peaceful attraction. Different zones bathed in light and music were developed as a serene escape.

Vigue says the park—located 12 miles from the Georgia-Florida border—conducted research and then marketed the event to areas of dense population within a close drive.

"I always kind of like to say, 'We're the theme park for the Panhandle,'" he says. "We very intentionally want to be the value option."

That includes a holiday F&B program promoting a tasting card, complete with a wearable lanyard. For one price, guests can then sample baked goods, hot chocolate, and desserts, along with receiving a dinner entrée at the park's Lonestar BBQ restaurant.

"One of the things that we kind of remain really centric to is how do we continue to be affordable and offer a really good experience," Vigue says.

SCOTT FAIS

SCOTT FAIS

FUNWORLD TV DIGITAL EXTRA

HOLIDAY SAFARI

Beginning June 5, learn more details of how Wild Adventures planned their inaugural year of Christmas Wild and Bright. See the story at **IAAPA.org/ChristmasEvent**

Holiday Magic Wish List

Much like a Christmas wish list, Scott Swenson, owner of Scott Swenson Creative Development, offers five suggestions to operators looking to flip the switch on a glowing holiday event in the future.

Order Early

Order lighting and decorations early. Swenson believes this will give the best price and help guarantee purchases arrive in time to be installed. He says very few facilities order Christmas decor in January and February. This is when the cost is at its lowest and the selection is best.

Hire More St. Nicks

Swenson says Santa photos are always more popular than expected. Operators should consider creating a "multi room" Santa experience (which cleverly hides the fact that there are more than one of "Santa's helpers" taking photos). More Santa Clauses equal shorter queues.

Plan for Staffing

Should a facility want strolling entertainers present constantly throughout the event, Swenson says it's important to budget resources—from labor costs for multiple people cast in the same role to a separate costume for each. He believes this keeps performers energized and helps with retention, so operators don't need to facilitate an "elf hunt" mid-season.

Create Creature Comforts

Basic creature comforts for the guests can improve guest satisfaction scores and increase length of stay. If an event is staged in a cold climate, Swenson recommends fun places for families to warm up (indoor spaces, safe fire pits, etc.). "If guests are uncomfortable, they will complain. Keep them comfortable," he says.

Encourage Return Visits

Swenson says return visits can be generated by offering a series of dated ornaments or making certain that every selfie spot has the event logo and year on display. "Some of my clients have specific photo opportunities that families have come back to, season after season, and by adding a nice looking sign with the logo and year, it helps them remember the ages of the kids in the photo and the special memories they associate with your event," he concludes.

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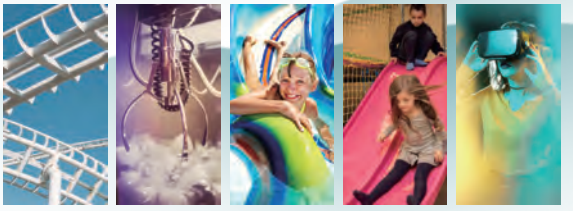

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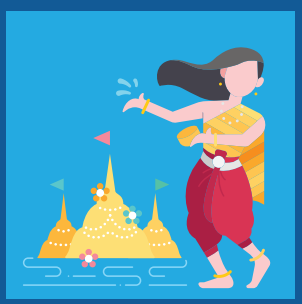

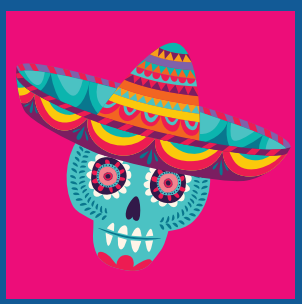

ATTRACTIONS WORLDWIDE HARNESS TRENDS AND DELIVER NEW EVENTS

by Juliana Gilling

Holidays and special events have huge pulling power. Attractions worldwide honor traditions and invent new festivities to stay on people's minds year-round.

Funworld shares how attractions around the world fill their operating calendar with events centered around holidays—or how they created their own celebration—each designed to increase repeat visitation and drive revenue.

RESORTS WORLD SENTOSA

RESORTS WORLD SENTOSA

A dragon is paraded during the Starlit Dragon Spectacular at Resorts World Sentosa.

NEW STARTS

2024 brought the Year of the Dragon roaring in. Resorts World Sentosa (RWS), home to attractions including Universal Studios Singapore and the S.E.A. Aquarium, celebrated the Lunar New Year in style.

From Jan. 27 to Feb. 25, Universal Studios Singapore unveiled new shows featuring DreamWorks Animation's Po and Master Tigress from "Kung Fu Panda." DreamWorks Lunar Light Up, a dazzling lantern display featuring characters from "Kung Fu Panda 4," "How to Train Your Dragon," and "Madagascar" debuted. The Dragon of Destiny nighttime show captivated audiences with dragon dances.

Cherry blossom trees, red lanterns, and dragons adorned the park, allowing visitors to capture extra-lucky selfies. Holiday dishes included crispy lychee chicken karaage and sweet blossom ice cream. Guests could also purchase exclusive merchandise.

At the S.E.A. Aquarium, divers performed an underwater dragon dance daily. The aquarium team wove Chinese greetings and stories about sea dragons into the visitor journey. Guests could win VIP tickets in a Spot the Weedy Sea Dragons contest, and RWS' Starlit Dragon Spectacular live show, which premiered an 88-meter LED dancing dragon, ushered in good fortune.

Wild Wild Wet Singapore water park launched its month-long Songkran Kids Festival in April. The Thai New Year celebration of Songkran is about fresh starts. The festivities center around guests actively splashing each other with water. To encourage the fun, the water park gave children water blasters to play with. In order to enhance the atmosphere, the park also implemented live DJs, dance parties, and an elephant-themed inflatable obstacle course.

RESORTS WORLD SENTOSA

WHAT WEATHER PRECAUTIONS/ADAPTATIONS DOES AN OUTDOOR EVENT NEED TO KEEP IN MIND FOR EARLY AND LATE SEASON EVENTS?

CHAD BAUMER

Our northern-based clients tend to have a guest profile that is just fine being outside in the cold, so operations are as normal—as long as there are spaced out locations to get warm through the event. BMP's rule of thumb is three locations to get warm per themed land or zone. Our southern-based clients are a bit more concerned with cold, requiring clever use of indoor facilities. Rain is the ultimate struggle for all in the winter. Giving your guests the chance to move their tickets to non-rain days at no cost is a great solution to avoid breakage in ticket per caps.

— Brian Morrow, Owner, B Morrow Productions

PORTAVENTURA WORLD

BUSCH GARDENS WILLIAMSBURG

Performers dance during the Viva Carnival show at PortAventura World.

CARNIVAL SPIRIT

Carnival is an increasingly popular reason for a party. PortAventura World in Spain brought the pizazz again this year after launching its first Carnival campaign in 2023. "It was a complete success, so we did not hesitate to kick off our new season—the longest and earliest in our history—with a new edition of these celebrations," says David García, PortAventura World's managing director.

The world's most famous Carnivals, from Venice to Brazil, served as inspiration for the event's planners. Colorful parades, floats, drum bands, and live shows created a festive atmosphere from Feb. 9 to March 17. Samba-dancing carnival queens, acrobats, masked characters in Venetian costumes, and musicians took to PortAventura World's streets. The Viva Carnaval show combined a dance party and Mexican food.

"Carnival is a season aimed at families, and every corner of the resort is decorated in detail," García says. "Our hotels and restaurants also transform to offer an unforgettable experience, allowing visitors to 'travel' to places like Venice, Brazil, or Mexico."

After Carnival, PortAventura World moved on to Easter (March 22 to May 17). "Adapting an amusement park to multiple thematic changes is a complex process involving creativity, strategic planning, and efficient resource management," García says. He adds that the key is to have a long-term vision; PortAventura World keeps flexibility and sustainability in mind so that each space or service can be easily altered. "We have a specialized team responsible for carrying out all these changes in record time and in the most efficient way possible, both technically and environmentally," García says. "The goal is to achieve an undetectable transition between one theme and another so it does not affect the visitor's experience and the park remains updated and perfect in their eyes."

In Virginia, Busch Gardens Williamsburg let the good times roll with its Mardi Gras special event every weekend from Jan. 26 through March 3. In addition to the New Orleans-style entertainment, food is a major attraction. Busch Gardens Williamsburg's Mardi Gras has more than 40 New Orleans favorites, including beignets, fried oyster po'boys, Cajun-style crawfish boil, and hurricane cocktails. Guests can indulge in Mardi Gras-themed food and beverage samplers.

Plopsa parks in Belgium embraced the Carnival spirit during the Krokusvakantie (crocus days) spring break with Carnival-themed parties, polonaise (conga line) dances, games, and meet-and-greets.

WHEN SHOULD AN ATTRACTION REACH OUT TO A PARTNER TO BEGIN DISCUSSING SPECIAL EVENT PROGRAMMING?

Ideally, looking a year ahead or six months at a minimum. (We have, however, transformed spaces into seasonal destinations in 30 days, but we do not recommend this if it can be avoided.) The more time we have, the greater the opportunity for our team to brainstorm, innovate, script, design, compose, costume, cast, and ultimately unveil an extraordinary experience. Rushed timelines often lead to compromises or inflated costs.

Even more optimally, crafting packages for summer, fall, and holiday seasons simultaneously allows for cohesive planning.

—Amy Cannon, Vice President, Land Operations, RWS Global

SIX FLAGS MAGIC MOUNTAIN

DUTCH WONDERLAND

SPRINGING INTO ACTION

Scream Break returned to Southern California's Six Flags Magic Mountain from March 8 through April 14, where guests discovered what happens when monsters go on spring break. Taking a page from the park's autumn Fright Fest, Scream Break 2024 offered after-hours thrills, including two haunted houses, three chilling scare zones, unlimited ride access, a Dead Man's Party with DJs, and ghoulish grub and drinks, including "blood bags" filled with sangria.

Elsewhere in SoCal, Knott's Berry Farm cooked up a spring festival celebrating the small but mighty boysenberry. The annual Boysenberry Festival is unique to Knott's Berry Farm and offers a feast of entertainment, food, and merchandise on select dates from March 8 to April 28. This year, guests chose between more than 75 boysenberry-inspired recipes, from chicken tikka masala with boysenberry curry sauce to a boysenberry brownie parfait. Musical performances, berry-good games, a boysenberry pie-eating contest, and a craft fair drew crowds.

Dutch Wonderland's 2024 Eggcellent Easter Celebration included an Easter egg scavenger hunt, a new puppet show, photo opportunities with Tuft the Easter Bunny, and seasonal souvenirs. Floral displays and giant eggs provided picture-perfect backdrops.

Calgary Zoo's Easter Eggstravaganza promised treat stations for children, games, and an Easter-themed brunch.

Children meet with Tuft the Easter Bunny at Dutch Wonderland.

KNOTT'S BERRY FARM

WHERE ARE SPECIAL EVENT PERFORMERS HOUSED DURING THE RUN OF THE SHOW?

The approach to housing arrangements for team members and talent varies significantly. While some parks have on-site cast housing, others strike deals with nearby apartment complexes. Then there are those that entrust us to handle all facets of sourcing and securing suitable accommodations for the season. It's a tailored approach, unique to each park's needs and resources.

—Kevin Kreczko, Executive Vice President, Business Development, Products and Services, RWS Global

GLOBAL VILLAGE

IMAGICAA

Global Village illuminates a Ramadan Wonders sign that draws attention to the park's festivities.

A BLESSED MONTH

Global Village in Dubai invites visitors to experience Ramadan in a unique setting where cultures converge, traditions thrive, and celebrations abound.

In 2024, Global Village has 27 pavilions spanning the world's cultures, more than 3,500 shopping outlets, and over 250 dining options. During Ramadan, guests could stay at the park until 2 a.m.

Ramadan-themed decorations and lighting provided picturesque backdrops for guests' memories. The Arabian Orchestra performed daily, and musical fireworks displays illuminated the park on Fridays and Saturdays.

New this year, the Ramadan Wonders Souk, inspired by traditional Emirati markets, immersed visitors in Ramadan's rich flavors and customs. Global Village also hosted the joyous festivities of Eid al-Fitr from April 10 to 17.

At the core of Global Village's holiday programming is an entertainment lineup that boasts an average of 250 shows per night, totaling more than 40,000 performances annually. The destination is committed to customizing entertainment experiences for each holiday season. By embracing diversity, tailoring experiences, and paying homage to tradition, Global Village crafts moments that resonate with guests.

IMG Worlds of Adventure in Dubai created an Arabian Nights event for the Ramadan season. Storytellers and puppeteers brought stories from "One Thousand and One Nights" to life. Guests could relax in traditional Arabian majlis (furniture) settings and enjoy an Iftar buffet. Arabian Nights is one of the highlights in the park's calendar, with events for Eid, Lunar New Year, summer, Halloween, and Diwali.

FALL AND WINTER FESTIVITIES

Diwali is a celebration of light, and India's Imagicaa theme park enchants guests with a luminous spectacle in November. Imagicaa provides a modern twist on the Diwali festivities, which focus on joy and togetherness.

Imagicaa's team paints the park with light; every attraction sparkles and shines. In 2023, Imagicaa launched the Grand Musical Fountain Show, combining music, lights, and water choreography. Following the fountain show, guests can see the Grand Imagicaa Night Parade wind through the park.

Imagicaa hosts a flea market full of Diwali-related items and gifts, and festive

WHAT IS THE BEST WAY FOR A PARK TO BALANCE RELIGIOUS ICONS AND PROGRAMMING WITH SECULAR DÉCOR AND PROGRAMMING?

Their decision should be based on their mission, vision, and values. There is a place for both to coexist in the right environments. For example, there are some parks that have chapels or churches or similar religious fixtures within their environments and naturally allow for that piece of the holiday season to be celebrated alongside the secular decorations. This might be more difficult for other types of entities who don't already have this association. But, if it makes sense within their core construct, or it is done as part of specific special event dedicated to the religious aspects of the season, it can work.

— Adrea Gibbs, CEO, Alriginal Productions

XCARET PARK

food is abundant. Families and friends can gather around communal tables to share savory samosas, delicious jalebis, stories, and laughter.

Halloween celebrations also continue to gain popularity. "Nothing screams Halloween more than the United Kingdom's Thorpe Park's infamous Fright Nights. We've been perfecting the experience for 23 years," says Neil Poulter, divisional director at Thorpe Park Resort.

The park creates terrifying live-action scare zones, live shows, and scare mazes that join thrill rides for extra adrenaline after dark. A new roller coaster, Hyperia, is slated to join this year's lineup of offerings.

"It's a true team effort to put on an event as vast and epic as Fright Nights and with such high production value," Poulter says. "Our creative teams work tirelessly to design new attractions each year while adapting others to ensure we're constantly moving the event forward and making the experience even more awesome for guests."

Thorpe Park ensures that Fright Nights are accessible to as many guests as possible. "We launched 'No Scare' lanyards for guests who want to attend the event but don't want to be approached by the roaming actors. The idea came from guest and staff feedback, and the lanyards have been extremely popular. All of our scare mazes are wheelchair accessible," Poulter says. "We open the [park] gates at 10 a.m., as usual, to cater for families and guests who find the full Fright Nights experience a little too intense." Fright Nights offerings begin at 3 p.m., giving families ample time to enjoy the attractions without spooky elements looming.

THORPE PARK

Mexico's Day of the Dead (Día de los Muertos) holiday commemorates death as part of life and is a time to remember loved ones. Grupo Xcaret has always shared its love for Mexico's culture and traditions with the world. 2024 will mark the 18th edition of Xcaret's Festival of Traditions of Life and Death, scheduled from Oct. 30 to Nov. 3. Xcaret Park serves as the main venue.

"Since the first festival, Grupo Xcaret has invited the Mayan communities of Quintana Roo to share their traditions with the public, including altars and offerings, narratives, the traditional dinner for the dead (called Hanal Pixan), and music, dance, and theater performances. Each year, we invite one of the country's states to share its diverse traditions surrounding the celebration of the dead," explains Mauricio Kuri, Xcaret's corporate communications director. The result is an authentic, vibrant, and soulful festival bursting with life. FW

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FALL on the FARM

How seasonal agricultural-based events gave rise to permanent attractions in Illinois farm country

Story and Photos by Michael Costello

WITHIN AN HOUR DRIVE OF CHICAGO, America's farm country is an unlikely setting for growing attractions. However, an increased appetite for seasonal fun is rooted in the tradition of selecting pumpkins and picking apples.

These farm-based attractions offer refined guest experiences and professional operations that include what would be found at larger attractions—from friendly staff and front gate operations, to signature food and beverage (F&B) operations and unique merchandise. Thoughtfully designed environments create a sense of place for a plethora of seasonal activities and attractions.

JONAMAC ORCHARD

Malta, Illinois

At the core of Jonamac Orchard's success is apple harvesting.

The 105-acre farm first started to diversify its portfolio 40 years ago to include a range of autumn activities and attractions that cater to a wide audience. By expanding beyond apple picking, the McArtor Family, third-generation owners of the farm, created multiple revenue streams and increased its customer base. The orchard's petting zoo, playground, haunted corn maze, various special events, and live entertainment provided by local musicians are proven to attract families, school groups, and tourists looking for a unique experience.

In addition to its on-site attractions, Jonamac Orchard has also capitalized on the growing demand for locally produced artisanal products. The orchard's bakery—producing treats like apple pies and cider donuts—is a popular destination. The latest addition to the facility is the Cider House, a hand-built, wooden barn structure with architectural details resembling structures found at a theme park. Inside, tables and seating are located in the front, while a cidery sits in the back. A conveyor system redirects apple byproducts out of the building for sustainable reuse in composting.

jonamacorchard.com

Jonamac Orchard's Cider House is the largest investment made to the farm, cementing it as an attraction.

BENGTSON'S PUMPKIN FARM

Homer Glen, Illinois

Bengtson Pumpkin Farm bills itself as a fall festival and pumpkin patch … that resembles a theme park in every sense. While the Bengtson family's business began operation in 1981 solely as a pumpkin farm, the evolution of the business as an attraction is evident.

While Scott Bengtson's grandparents originally delivered their pumpkin crops to grocery stores, his father later "took out a newspaper ad for hayrides and started doing hayrides out of the pumpkin patch and it was an immediate success for them," says Bengtson, a third-generation owner of the business. "They started lining cars up and down the road."

Bengtson explains his family originally leased the land before purchasing the property in 2015. Then in 2023, Bengtson purchased the remainder of the business from a relative. He then truly realized his vision for the property.

Paved walkways lined with trees and landscaping lead guests to all corners of the facility and its dozen amusement rides; barnyard animal petting zoo; Jimmy Crack Corn Box—a 6,900-square-foot corn kernel-filled playbox; more F&B locations; an arena with tall bleachers and an infield themed to a barnyard, where pig races are held in front of roaring crowds; and of course, the farm's tried and true pumpkin patch. Guests are permitted to bring wagons into the park to load up pumpkins or grab them from any of the pumpkin-built 'mountains' found throughout the park.

Bengtson is particularly relieved by his decision to add attractions and fixtures to the park in a permanent nature as much as possible. Most of the park's rides are housed in substantial structures exhibiting skilled carpentry work with

ABOVE LEFT: From mountains of pumpkins, Guests of Bengtson's are able to choose.

BELOW: Bengtson's Pumpkin Patch offers substantially themed attractions and heavy landscaping.

architectural embellishments that create a themed experience. A family coaster by SPF Visa was installed in 2017 with a barn-shaped station, across from an in-house built, indoor/outdoor family tractor-themed ride, Tractor Town, that showcases vintage farm equipment and in-house built audio animatronic farm animals.

"One of the things that makes us different is that throughout the years, we've been going to IAAPA [Expo]," Bengtson explains. "I've been going since I was 12. A lot the things we've done—the rides for example—has been through attending IAAPA [Expo].

A dual-tracked steeplechase ride from Metallbau Emmeln GmbH & Co. KG—one with rooster-themed cars, and another with rabbit-themed cars—load in the same station and queue house designed as an extravagant wooden barn with unique turrets and gables that rise three stories tall.

FUNWORLD DIGITAL FEATURE.
Learn more about Bengtson's at **IAAPA.org/bengtsons**

"We just kept sticking dormers and overhangs and on it, we'd print a picture of it, and we'd let it sit in the office for a few days, we'd get another idea of things to add, we'd keep shuffling things in CAD, and kept doing that over and over," says Bengtson about his persistence in producing the right result.

Aside from the aesthetics and sense of place created by the permanence of Bengtson's additions is the satisfaction created by the operational benefit at the end of the operating season before winter. "[We] literally roll the doors shut and leave. There's nothing to tear down," Bengtson tells Funworld. In lieu of traditional park benches, Bengtson introduced concrete sitting walls molded to look like boulders. "A lot less cleanup. A lot less maintenance," says Bengtson, who adds that there is no rust or wooden planks to replace.

pumpkinfarm.com

GOEBBERT'S FARM

Pingree Grove, Illinois

Goebbert's Farm has roots stretching back to 1948 when the family entered the business with a humble roadside vegetable stand. Today, the Goebbert family grows pumpkins, flowers, apples, and vegetables, while the attraction side of the business offers an immersive experience that combines farm life with seasonal activities.

An amusement area offers rides such as a miniature train, carousel, slide, and an

An LED-lit facade is situated at the front of a sloped, drive-in arena, constructed out of recycled roadway blacktop acquired from the local department of transportation.

immersive haunted house walk-through, repurposed out of an old corn crib (a structure used to store and dry corn). Paved walkways lead guests to other activities, such as the Animal Land with its farm and exotic animals, corn mazes, pig races, magic shows, wagon rides, camel rides, and pony rides. Revenue operations include a gift shop selling homemade goods and locally sourced products; a vintage-styled shooting gallery built from scratch; F&B operations selling local beers and homemade fare; and a wedding and special events pavilion.

While the farm's icon may be the 18-foot-wide "Happy Jack" jack-o'-lantern affixed to a silo that can be seen for miles, its mascot is the orange "Pumpkin Eating Dinosaur"—an animatronic that picks up and crushes pumpkins in its steel jaws while amazed children (and dads) look on. (The reptilian robot is controlled by an operator in a nearby booth.) Guests are happy to wait for the spectacle and purchase specially themed Pumpkin Eating Dinosaur plush in the farm's gift shop.

Immediately following fall activities, the farm converts to celebrating the holiday season. Out of view of the amusement area awaits a massive, LED-lit, Hollywood-style façade of a mansion. The façade is situated in front of a sloped drive-in arena where cars pull up to watch a 12–15-minute holiday light show, after paying admission. For efficiency, and increased capacity, the shows play constantly with only a few minutes between presentations. While half of the arena full of cars is watching, the other half is unloading and reloading. Goebbert's also offers a holiday light drive-through, offering 1,000,000 lights. Pricing for the show and drive-through are offered separately or bundled.

Lloyd Goebbert, second generation owner who lives in a house on the farm near the amusement area's front gate, operates the farm with his family. Goebbert shares with Funworld how he likes the seasonal nature of the attraction business, operating for two months out of the year.

"Most of the things we do now, we try to make more permanent. We used to set things up for just the eight weeks that we are open," says Goebbert, who sees opportunity in opening the venue for large parties or corporate events outside of the autumn season. FW

goebberts.com

ABOVE: Guests line up to watch the Pumpkin Eating Dinosaur pick up and munch on pumpkins grown at the farm.

BELOW: Lloyd Goebbert stands near the entrance gate of his fall attraction while Happy Jack, sitting atop a silo, looks beyond the Illinois countryside.

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BEACH PARK

Food for Thought

How attractions are working toward sustainable food and beverage services

by Corrie Pelc

A paper straw is provided to accompany beverages at Beach Park.

AMONG CUPS, PLATES, CUTLERY, NAPKINS, STRAWS, containers, and food scraps, food and beverage operations, along with special events, are making promising sustainability strides at attractions by coming up with unique ways to help reduce the amount of refuse. New innovations like compostable dinnerware provide a new option, while attractions are going the extra step to ensure their staff and guests are recycling or reusing items.

Funworld shares how different global operators are injecting sustainability into their standard operating procedures.

Recycle, Recycle, Recycle

Village Roadshow Theme Parks in Australia launched a bottle-recycling initiative called Containers for Change across its properties, including Warner Bros. Movie World, Sea World, Wet'n'Wild, Paradise Country, and Australian Outback Spectacular.

"This initiative was commenced at Wet'n'Wild in 2019, and has now been rolled out to all of our properties," says Village Roadshow Theme Parks COO Bikash Randhawa. "Last financial year, we recycled over 128,000 bottles through this program. Excitingly, the profits from this initiative are donated to the Sea World Foundation, which enables our team to continue their research, rescue, and conservation efforts."

For attractions looking to elevate their recycling game, Alec Cooley, senior advisor at customized recycling and waste solutions provider Busch Systems, says it's important to set up recycling bins that are easily visible to guests.

"Most people are distracted—trash is not their priority," Cooley continues. "They're focused on how they're going to clean their hands, what ride they're going to go to next, and so they're only giving it a little bit of their attention, if even that."

Cooley recommends an attraction design its bins so that they're color coded, with large signage, and place openings directly next to each other—highlighting the trash and recycling spaces.

"There's a lot of evidence and research that's gone into showing how you design the collection bins to intuitively guide people where to put the correct thing can make a big difference ... so that you're collecting more of the recyclables and it's staying clean," Cooley says.

Compostable and Reusable Options

Water park and resort Beach Park in Aquiraz, Fortaleza, Brazil, first implemented sustainable food and beverage measures in 2019, says Sustainability Manager Raissa Bisol. "We have only been using paper straws, which are composted after use," she explains. "Our restaurants use cutlery and glasses made from reusable materials."

Randhawa reports that Village Roadshow Theme Parks has also "taken significant steps to reduce single-use

BUSCH SYSTEMS

Bins from Busch Systems' Renegade Series, which is made of 100% post-consumer recycled content at an outdoor fair.

plastic waste by eliminating plastic cutlery and plates." In addition, Village Roadshow has introduced compostable and FSC-certified (Forest Stewardship Council) cutlery and plates. FSC Forest Management Certification confirms that a specific area of forest is managed in a manner where trees are harvested responsibly preventing no net loss of forest over time.

Reilly Berk, chief executive officer at food service supplier Berk Enterprises, recognizes a push towards both compostable items—such as eco-friendly food-serving products and reusable items like large beverage containers. However, pricing can sometimes be a deterrent from using these types of supplies.

"Although that initial cost might be a little bit more expensive, you can probably sell your product for more because you're giving them something they can take home; you're giving them something that they can reuse and take into their real life," Berk explains. "That could also be an incentive to people in the industry—you pay a little bit more upfront, but you could probably make more off your pocket at the end of the day."

BERK ENTERPRISES

Eco-Friendly Food Practices

According to Chief Operating Officer Kasper Schumacher, Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen, Denmark, continues to reduce its carbon dioxide (CO_2) emissions by offering alternative meal choices.

"Tivoli's desire is to enhance both the quality and availability of alternative foods with lower carbon footprints, and therefore follows the food industry's development of the product portfolio in these areas," he explains. "This allows guests in the future to choose among dishes with meat, fish, and plant-based options with lower CO_2 emissions."

Tivoli Gardens plans to eliminate food waste by 2030. Things like potato peels, eggshells, and coffee grounds are part of a waste-utilization process used to make biofuel. The park took initial steps toward sustainability in the kitchen by outlining needs earlier. "Food waste is reduced through better menu planning, procurement, and storage," Schumacher says.

Over at Beach Park, Bisol says they have ongoing campaigns to reduce food and beverage waste by focusing on conscientious consumption of food and beverage ingredients. The park created a visual metaphor that encourages employees and service providers to only use what is needed. "We have a display table with the amount of food needed to produce the volume wasted the previous day," she adds. "This action helps raise awareness among employees."

Village Roadshow Theme Parks actively participates in the City of Gold Coast Commercial Food Waste program, . "Through this initiative, food scraps and organic waste are sorted and redirected away from landfills to an external composting facility," Randhawa explained. "In 2023 alone, we successfully diverted an impressive 123 tons of food scraps from ending up in landfills."

A Forward-Looking Mindset

Looking toward the future of sustainable food and beverage practices, Cooley says there is a strong trend toward reusable items and away from single-use disposables. "You can do compostable and other systems that, to some extent, are a better alternative than simply putting things in the trash, but even with those, there is an environmental footprint to producing compostable cups, etc.," he explains. "One of the advantages of reuse is that it dramatically improves that environmental footprint overall, so I think you'll see a trend around that growing."

TIVOLI GARDENS

Consumers are living in a new consumption model, asking facility owners and operators for a significant transformation, Bisol says. "Sustainable practices not only help to conserve the environment but also raise awareness among customers and visitors for environmental causes, increasing the dissemination of impactful information to clients and partners," she continued.

Schumacher believes amusement parks will start offering more plant-based options on par with existing food options. "Hybrid meat products consisting of both meat and plant protein may become more common as consumers seek to reduce meat consumption to protect the climate. And in hybrid products, part of the animal protein is replaced by plant protein," he added.

Additionally, considering that younger generations are more environmentally conscious than their predecessors, Berk believes that up-and-coming attractions professionals will feel empowered to enact sustainable change in their respective roles.

"I hope as we continue to evolve and you get some of the younger generations into this industry, that they just want to change on their own because it's the right thing to do," she continues. "I think there's going to continue to be a push, I think people are going to keep talking about it, and slowly but surely, I think we're going to get there." FW

BERK ENTERPRISES

Berk Enterprises displays its sustainable cutlery products.

Exploring Sustainable Supplier Solutions

by Avery Matteo

Leveraging sustainable food and beverage (F&B) suppliers is not just a step toward environmental responsibility at an attraction—it is also a strategic move that generates a positive impression in the eyes of today's conscientious consumers. While the quest for innovative, eco-conscious, and affordable suppliers can be daunting, Funworld aims to streamline the process with a list of resources as attractions begin their search for eco-friendly F&B products best suited to their needs.

PAPER PRODUCTS

Green Paper Products

Green Paper Products delivers on its company name, providing customers with disposable paper products made from plant-based or recycled materials. All products are either recyclable or compostable, and customers can choose from cups, plates, bowls, trays, containers, cutlery, and more.

https://greenpaperproducts.com

PLATES AND CUTLERY

Bambu

Specializing in party supplies, Bambu offers compostable, single-use bamboo plates, straws, cutlery, and serving tongs. With a sleek look and composed entirely from certified organic bamboo, this supplier may be an ideal option for small-batch orders.

https://bambuhome.com

Memeda

Memeda, which offers eco-friendly disposable products, is unique in its ability to customize products for businesses—ranging from stamping a logo to designing an entirely new product. From compostable plates to biodegradable to-go boxes, they offer a wide variety of disposable products for the needs of any F&B location.

https://memeda.us

Verterra

With a focus on plateware and serveware—as well as sustainable packaging—Verterra produces all its products with renewable resources, including palm leaves, bamboo, balsa wood tree trunks, and sugarcane. The company offers retail and wholesale products at a variety of price points and in different styles.

www.verterra.com

WASTE DISPOSAL

Landmark Studio

IAAPA member Landmark Studio offers bins made of post-consumer recycled materials, with different models designed to handle trash, recycling, and e-waste. In addition, Landmark offers products for food service establishments such as beverage stations and bussing stations, along with sustainable restaurant furniture like dining chairs, tables, and benches.

www.landmarkstudio.com

Recyclingbin.com

Recyclingbin.com is noted for its products that use as little plastic as possible, resulting in less resources and energy usage throughout the production process. The bin pieces are also shipped flat, preventing the shipment of large boxes that require additional disposable shipping materials. Customers are also encouraged to order replacement parts as their bins age, saving buyers money—and preventing the unnecessary creation of production waste.

www.recyclingbin.com/Eco-Friendly-Sustainability

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Big Results, Limited Budgets

How to successfully design on a limited scale

by Michael Switow

PEPPA PIG CAFE

ABOVE: Children in yellow protecive jumpsuits play in a pool of muddy water at Peppa Pig Play in Chengdu, China.

BELOW: Children play in Grandpa Pig's garden at the Peppa Pig Cafe in Chengdu, China.

THREE YOUNG CHILDREN, COVERED FROM HEAD TO TOE in blue plastic jumpsuits and matching rubber booties with only their hands and faces exposed, jump into a shallow indoor pond of dark muddy water at the Peppa Pig Play in Chengdu, China. Their squeals of joy pierce the air. Parents and grandparents look on from a nearby table, smiling and sipping steaming hot coffee, while some keep a watchful eye in case their child suddenly decides to make mud angels.

The Peppa Pig Play Cafe in Chengdu—an immersive themed dining and play experience for children ages 2-6 years old—is one of two such facilities in China.

The dining space, infused with intellectual property, is an attraction to families looking to eat out and be entertained. As the brainchild of China Leisure Development's Linda Dong, the play cafe concept fuses dining and children's play as a cost-effective way to meet consumer demand for entertainment.

Across the globe, developers face pressure to deliver experiences at more affordable prices.

"Guests are more cautious about spending their disposable income and expect more for less," observes Forrec Vice President of Business Development Linda Hung. "By prioritizing affordability and value, operators can continue to attract visitors and maintain financial viability during challenging economic times."

Ticketing and Revenue

One strategy is to increase the percentage of revenue that is derived from in-attraction sales. At Peppa Pig Play Cafe, half the floor space is for dining, while the other half is dedicated for children's play. Revenue from ticket sales and food and beverage (F&B) tabs are also evenly split, with retail and special events accounting for another 20%.

"Attractions and theming are the heaviest investments. Even with custom furniture, it's nowhere near as expensive as custom attractions or props," Dong explains.

She launched her first major attraction in China in December 2021—a $4.6 million Nickelodeon-themed family entertainment center in Shenzhen. While Nickelodeon PlayTime continues to attract visitors from both sides of the nearby border with Hong Kong, COVID-19 and China's slowing economy led her to explore projects with lower investment costs, which could then be passed on to consumers in the form of lower ticket prices.

"We have a lot of people in our industry that are very creative and have big ideas, so it's always about the product quality," Dong adds. "Sometimes, that's okay, but other times, it might not be sustainable. We won't design experiences that go over the budget. We design attractions to fit within the budgets from the start."

PEPPA PIG CAFE

PEPPA PIG CAFE

ABOVE: This dining space is designed as a carousel where guests sit inside oversized produce.

BELOW: Camping-themed booths are found in the Peppa Pig Cafe.

She recommends owners and operators who are looking for new investments consider viable products that are self-sustaining.

"We've been very conservative in our budgeting. Business sense has to be the key item to check before starting on a project," Dong says.

Strategic Budgeting

NEON Executive Vice President Darren Lim agrees that budgeting is critical, but he focuses more on maximizing profits than reducing costs. His data-driven approach, which is grounded in business fundamentals, is reaping rewards for NEON's large-scale epic experiences like Avatar: The Exhibition, which attracted more than 2.5 million visitors in Singapore's Gardens by the Bay over a 14-month period. Meantime, Harry Potter: Visions of Magic is casting a spell on Hogwarts fans in Cologne, Germany.

"There's no point in spending $2 million and getting only 50,000 people," Li explains. "The key is attracting a larger audience efficiently."

PEPPA PIG CAFE

He believes market research is critical. Ticketing partners may be able to provide insights, particularly for international visitors.

"Consumers have short attention spans," Lim adds. "You really need to give a lot of thought into the product that you bring to the market. What worked in the past might not be what works in the future."

Begin With the End in Mind

Lim and Dong both advocate using a method they call "working backward." Both study the market, then estimate visitor numbers and average spend. Once they have confidence in their assumptions, each will calculate several scenarios for top-line revenue, discount the results for the expected payback period, and then judge whether the project makes sense.

They offer this example when planning a new project:

If an attraction owner expects 150,000 annual visitors and the average ticket price is $35, plus visitors spend an additional $15 inside the attraction on F&B or retail sales, then top-line revenue equates to $7.5 million. If the payback period is three years, an initial capital expenditure of $2-$3 million is reasonable.

"You see a lot of entertainment attractions that have not succeeded out there," says Hung. "They have closed down over the years, and a part of that is the level of investment didn't prove to be accurate. They've overspent, and they cannot sustain and cannot produce the results that were expected. So, I think that that's just led to smarter development—a greater demand on purposeful design within budgets."

Lim suggests leaving nothing to chance.

"I think a lot of people feel like it's an art," adds Lim. "They start with a budget and an idea, then hope to attract enough visitors. This is why so many businesses fail."

A Cautionary Tale

One attraction that recently closed after a short run is the BBC Earth Experience, which was produced and operated by Moon Eye Productions. It opened to

significant fanfare in West London in March 2023, promising an immersive 360-degree journey touching every continent. Less than a year later, the tour of Earth's diverse ecosystems featuring Sir David Attenborough shut its doors.

The failure of the British attraction provides a cautionary tale and valuable lessons for attractions operators.

The attractions scene in London is highly competitive. Tourists frequent Buckingham Palace to watch the changing of the guard; the Crown jewels at the Tower of London; Merlin Entertainments occupies prime real estate with Madame Tussauds and the Sea Life London Aquarium; the West End is home to more than 39 theaters, where everything from "Wicked" to "Back to the Future: The Musical" play nightly; and there is a plethora of free attractions, including all of the city's museums. Anyone setting up shop in London needs a clear understanding of the market.

"It doesn't matter how cheap or expensive you make it; if there is no market, it will not work," says LDP founding partner Yael Coifman.

The BBC Earth Experience was situated in a residential neighborhood, far removed from major tourist attractions. The choice of location, along with the £25-£30 ticket price, dissuaded many visitors. The experience could have still succeeded if its primary target market had consisted of locals. In that case, though, there must be a high degree of repeatability, which is something the BBC Earth Experience lacked.

In addition, the BBC Earth Experience did not live up to its billing. In online forums, unhappy guests argued that tickets were overpriced and that there was not enough to do; some said it was essentially an extended movie experience, rather than something truly immersive.

While Londoners can no longer watch footage from the BBC, Australians can. The attraction has reopened in Melbourne. FW

Get the Most From the Spend

Takeaways to save and use

Planning, budgeting, designing, and calculating return (along with reducing costs) are at the heart of any new project, big or small.

Funworld presents these ideas, perfect for clipping and referencing when navigating a design or working in the blue-sky space.

Leverage Intellectual Property

While it takes a budget to license popular international characters, intellectual properties generally increase footfall and lead to higher retail sales. Fast example: Harry Potter wands command higher prices and are in greater demand than generic magic wands.

Be Creative in the Dining Room

Intellectual property can play a role here too. At the Peppa Pig Play Cafe, the most popular dish is Bathtime Fried Rice (48 yuan, or US$6.70), which looks like a bathtub with rubber duckies and Peppa Pig's head sticking out above the "water." While the meal tastes good, it's the photogenic nature of the dish that fuels sales.

Create Flexible Spaces

Multipurpose areas provide flex space for additional entertainment during peak periods. They also enable attractions to generate new revenue streams and open at times when they might otherwise be closed. The stage of Sun World's outdoor multimedia show, Kiss of the Sea, is available for weddings and fashion shows. Sunway Lagoon, Busch Gardens, and Diggerland offer sleepover experiences in their existing venues. Other attractions use multipurpose areas for seasonal events like Halloween, Christmas, and summer festivals. "By offering diverse programming year-round, parks can attract repeat visitation and cater to a broader range of audience interests," advises Forrec Vice President of Business Development Linda Hung.

Increase In-Attraction Sales

Competitive socializing brands, such as Puttshack, Flight Club, and Family Fun Cafes, are perhaps the best examples of attractions that generate a large percentage of revenue from food and beverage (F&B) sales. Elevating the guest experience, though, can also lengthen the average time that visitors spend in an attraction and lead to greater in-attraction spending—not to mention repeat visits and positive reviews.

A Cautionary Note

While it may be tempting to rein in expenditure, particularly in the face of rising prices and a challenging economic environment, attractions need to exercise caution. Cutting back too much can lead to higher costs down the road or, worse, a failed attraction. "It's naive to think just cutting capital costs is the solution. There are always ramifications," warns LDP founding partner Yael Coifman. Cutting corners could lead to recurring maintenance issues that require external vendors or additional staff to repair. Additional hires might also be needed to boost guest engagement if the attraction itself is not fully developed.

Balancing the Risks and Potential of Artificial Intelligence

Identifying the most effective applications for AI

by Michael Switow

EVENT LISTINGS AND ADVERTISEMENTS IN FEBRUARY for the Willy Wonka Experience in Glasgow, Scotland, featured fantastical images of giant swirling lollipops, larger-than-life mushrooms, and waterfalls while promising "a new flavor to savor" every step of the way.

One problem: the images were created using artificial intelligence (AI).

The actual experience fell far short of what was promised, so much so that police were called and the attraction was closed within hours of opening. Not only was the marketing misleading, but the scripts the cast read from were also computer-generated. Willy Wonka's monologue was "pretty much AI-generated gibberish," Paul Connell, the actor cast to play the candymaker, explains in a TikTok video.

The Glasgow fiasco highlights the dangers of using AI to promote an attraction without properly vetting the ad copy and images—or ensuring that the visitor experience matches the hype.

"I'm startled by how many producers are posting photos online, saying 'Hey, this is the experience you're going to have,' and it clearly is not," says Scott Simmons, the creative director of ScareHouse, a Pennsylvania attraction. "That is setting up for such a failure when the customers come through. We're always insistent that everything we shoot and gather is indicative of the experience you're going to have."

"A lot of people don't trust marketing already, and this furthers that distrust," adds Brad Weinstein, a senior strategist at Newbridge. "There are a lot of haunted attractions that have computer-generated images that don't match the actual attraction. It really sets up the guests for the wrong experience, which will increase disappointment, bad reviews, and [have] a whole ripple effect."

Generative artificial-intelligence tools can be a great asset to attractions operators in all areas, Simmons and Weinstein agree, but they caution that marketing materials need to be an authentic representation of the experience.

AI Gonzo Marketing

At ScareHouse, Simmons uses AI features to create customized content that would prove too pricey or time-consuming to create previously. He leverages tools like Midjourney and Photoshop, for example, to "generate truly ridiculous looking memes very quickly."

In some cases, it only takes a single comment on social media to spark an idea. For instance, if a user mentions a movie, Simmons can generate an image featuring ScareHouse's iconic bunny that reacts to the comment using a line or theme from the movie.

"I have blown the mind of that individual customer who's like, 'Wow! ScareHouse made this meme just for me!'" he explains.

Artificial intelligence can also be a useful tool to personalize the guest experience. Outside ScareHouse's haunted houses, for example, cast members called Ghoul Scouts interact with visitors to create a party atmosphere. If a Ghoul Scout hears a group talking about Bruce Springsteen, she can discreetly open ChatGPT on her phone and ask for 10 Girl Scout cookie flavors based on songs by the singer. After picking the AI suggestions that she likes, she approaches the guests with her pitch for "Badlands Boo-terscotch Chips" and "Blinded by the Night Bites."

"AI is not replacing the actual creativity and drive," Simmons says. "It is a tool. It's giving my creative people an additional asset."

Simmons has also found the "generative fill" feature in Photoshop to be particularly useful.

"I can take all those promotional photos that were taken during the pandemic, where our guests were wearing masks, and digitally remove the masks. Even a year or so ago, that would have taken so long, and I don't know that I could have justified the expense of doing it. Now with a few clicks, I have new assets," he explains, adding that owners and operators can harness the digital tools for themselves. "These tools are already out there, and this is a perfect time to start playing with them and figuring out how all this stuff works."

AI Budgeting

Finance teams may also wish to start exploring how AI can improve efficiency. Benefits may include better decision making with data-driven insights, higher revenue through optimized pricing, and enhanced visitor experiences by more effectively deploying team members.

Dexibit's data analytics software, for example, uses machine learning to predict how many guests may visit an attraction on a given day or which season pass holders are unlikely to renew. The platform combines a park's existing data with information about school holidays, local events, weather trends, and even popular sports rivalries to make projections.

"Imagine doing this by hand," says Dexibit CEO Angie Judge. "You'd have to spend a huge amount of time with a big spreadsheet laying out when the Easter holiday is in the school calendar, spring break, and what the weather was like on a given day."

Natural language tools, meanwhile, can be used to aggregate and summarize visitor feedback, such as reviews in online forums.

"If you went through them by hand, it would take a long time to work out—'this one is angry, and this one is about restrooms or seating,'" she adds. "One of the amazing applications is that our customers use this to work out where they're going to invest, what they're going to invest in, and for operational improvements to improve visitor satisfaction."

Vineeta Juthani, who oversees four major water parks in Texas and Nevada in her role as controller at Pyek Group, is more cautious when it comes to artificial intelligence. She cautions against overly relying on AI for financial decisions. "Budgeting is ultimately a hands-on exercise because you need to focus on what changes could look like for every single category of spending," she says.

When choosing new AI tools, Juthani suggests that back-office teams consider whether these solutions can be used for multi-departmental budgeting, processing detailed general ledger transactions, generating cash flow statements and balance sheets, creating the types of chart visualizations that your organization requires, and integrating with payroll systems for streamlined financial management. Robust user permission systems are also important.

Adapting to new tools across departments may take time, but companies that are using them say it is worth the effort.

"When you do things the old way, you start out with a plan at the beginning of the year or quarter, and it's fixed; it doesn't change," explains Judge. "Machine learning fluctuates every single day because it's picking up on the latest things that are happening. So, the two are useful in conjunction with each other."

Insight in this business resource article came from an IAAPA Expo EDUSession. Join Funworld's Asia-Pacific correspondent Michael Switow, AECOM's Chris Yoshii, and Pantheon Lab's Christina Tse for a session titled AI in Action: Unlocking Opportunities in Your Attraction at IAAPA Expo Asia 2024 in Bangkok on May 28. Register today at **IAAPA.org/Expos**

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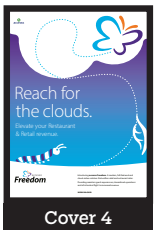

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by Jack Chan

Falling Into Place in the Attractions Industry

HOW I FOUND MY WAY into the exciting world of the attractions industry is fascinating. It all started with a serendipitous connection I made with an old client. At the time, her company was on the lookout for a salesperson to conquer the Asia-Pacific (APAC) region. I've always been up for an adventure, so I thought, why not give it a shot? Little did I know, this opportunity would lead me to a world filled with thrilling roller coasters and unforgettable experiences. This opportunity was also my steppingstone to becoming IAAPA's APAC vice president and executive.

When my old client reached out to me about the sales position in the APAC region, it exemplified the importance of making and keeping connections. Just like my client had a network of contacts and colleagues, IAAPA serves as a hub that connects professionals and companies from all regions of the world.

IAAPA is a global association dedicated to promoting and supporting the attractions industry. This dynamic organization brings together professionals from all corners of the globe, fostering collaboration and the exchange of ideas. Through IAAPA, a vast network of connections is established, allowing individuals and organizations to share knowledge, best practices, and innovations across borders.

By joining the attractions industry and becoming a part of IAAPA, I realized that the APAC region is not isolated; rather, it is intricately linked to other regions. The industry thrives on the exchange of ideas, technological advancements, and cultural influences that transcend geographical boundaries.

Throughout my time working in the APAC region, I've had the privilege of collaborating with professionals from different parts of the world thanks to IAAPA's global network. Whether it's attending industry conferences, participating in virtual events, or engaging in online communities, IAAPA has provided me with opportunities to connect with industry leaders, experts, and enthusiasts worldwide.

By tapping into the collective knowledge and experiences of individuals from various regions, I've gained invaluable insights into different markets, consumer preferences, and industry trends.

These connections have proven invaluable in my professional growth and understanding of the attractions industry. By tapping into the collective knowledge and experiences of individuals from various regions, I've gained invaluable insights into different markets, consumer preferences, and industry trends. This context has broadened my perspective and allowed me to contribute to the growth and development of the attractions industry—not only in the APAC region but on a global scale as well.

I believe being connected is one of the most important factors ensuring the broader success of the attractions industry, and I encourage everyone to join us at IAAPA Expo Asia, May 28-30 at the Queen Sirikit National Convention Center in Bangkok. FW

IAAPA EXPO ASIA

Registration is now open for IAAPA Expo Asia, the attractions industry's premier event in Asia. Learn more and register today at **IAAPA.org/Expos**

Jack Chan is the executive director and vice president of the IAAPA Asia-Pacific region (APAC). He's built connections in the attractions industry in Japan, Korea, China, Singapore, Vietnam and other parts of the region.

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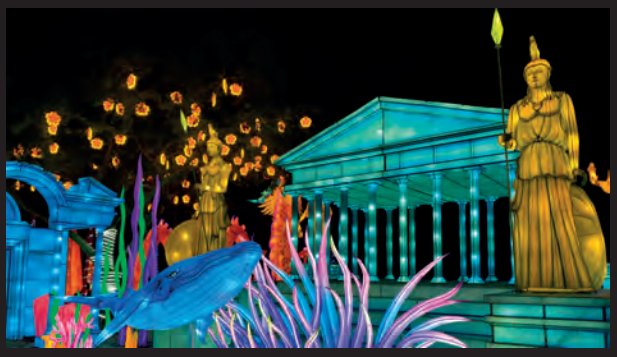

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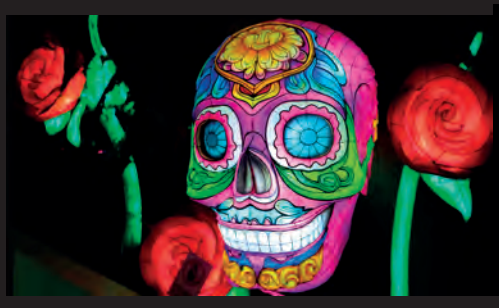

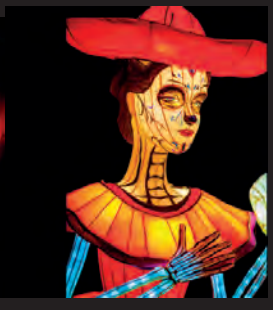

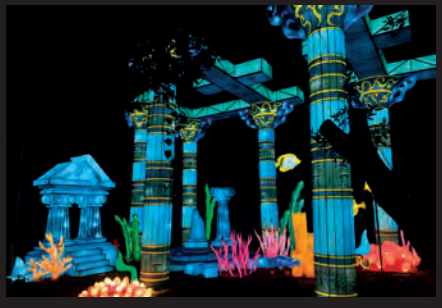

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